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AMAZING

stories



DO THESE
FACES BELONG
TO ONE
MAN?
See Page 8

BEYOND THE
UNIVERSE

TORO

I, ROBOT

DEVOLUTION

THE ETERNAL
WALL

INVADERS FROM
THE VOID



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founded by HUGO GERNSBACK

AMAZING STORIES

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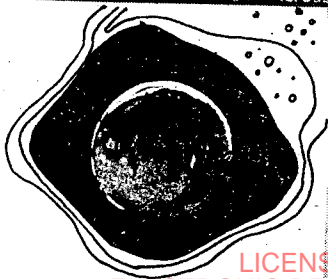
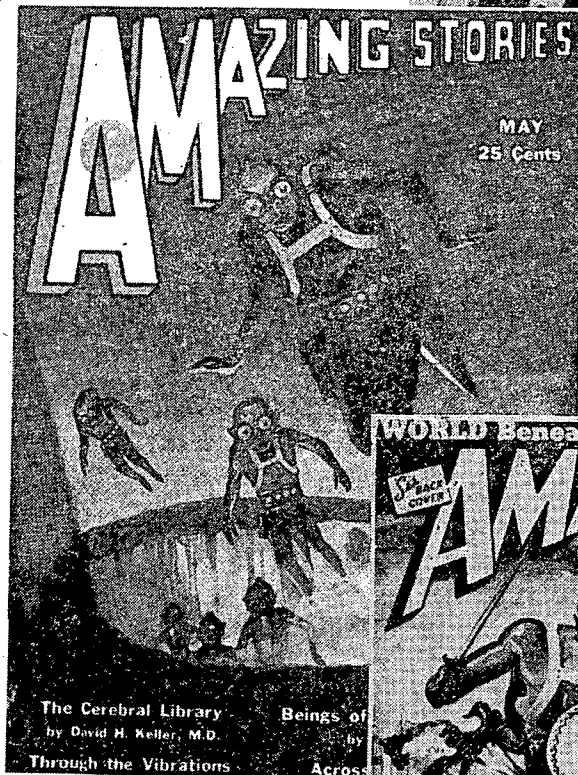
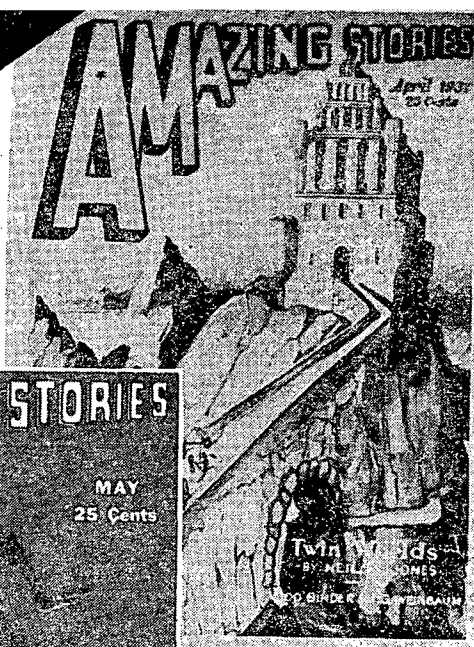
With so many UFO's supposedly circling our globe, surely some of the beings riding these vehicles will eventually contact us. But—for what reason, do you suppose? To wage war? Give us an important message for the survival of the planet Earth? Or—do they want something, maybe???



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It all started with
AMAZING



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We've come a long way, Hugo ...

ON BEING "GOLDEN" AGAIN

It all began with "Amazing Stories," right in the middle of the Roaring Twenties! people were much more world-bound in those days, leaving "scientifiction," as Hugo Gernsback called it, to teenage boys and some star-struck adults, mostly men.

Founded by Hugo Gernsback, "Amazing Stories" and the other adventure pulps that followed in its wake paved the way for the SF "Golden Age" of the 40's and 50's and the "New Wave" of the 60's. Now, the phenomenal "Star Wars" and "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" have ushered in a "Golden Age" of another kind; people who might never have picked up a SF magazine have been mesmerized by these spectacular filmland fantasies, swelling the ranks of avid SF fans tremendously.

"Star Wars," a sophisticated and spaced-out Land of Oz, rekindled a love for "far-out" adventure intermingled (ala "Close Encounters") with speculation about the universe and our place within it.

At the same time, people in general are much more aware of things like ecology, the population explosion, possible armageddons, future shock and many scientific developments. More science-wise about real dangers, they are looking to science fiction (proven accurate in its predictions quite often) for some answers to their fears.

No longer limited in appeal, the field now boasts about a 50% female readership according to Ben Bova, who notes this percentage now attending his lecture series.



Colleges are even offering courses in SF literature. Let's face it, we have come 'of age ... and another "Golden" one at that!

And in spite of some who are strictly "New Wave" addicts, we feel homage is due our "roots." Accordingly, this issue presents a selection of classics representative of SF story-spinning at its best; the kind *everyone* can enjoy!

Savoring the best from the past seems to do us all a lot of good. Witness today's nostalgic preoccupation with Tiffany lamps, Bogie, the 50's plus great comebacks such as Life Magazine and even King Kong.

Now seems the proper time to reidentify with our "roots" during this mind-boggling expansion of our ranks. In keeping, we have returned to an updated version of our old cover "Look" ... offering rare vintage wine in a new glass, so to speak. We hope you approve.

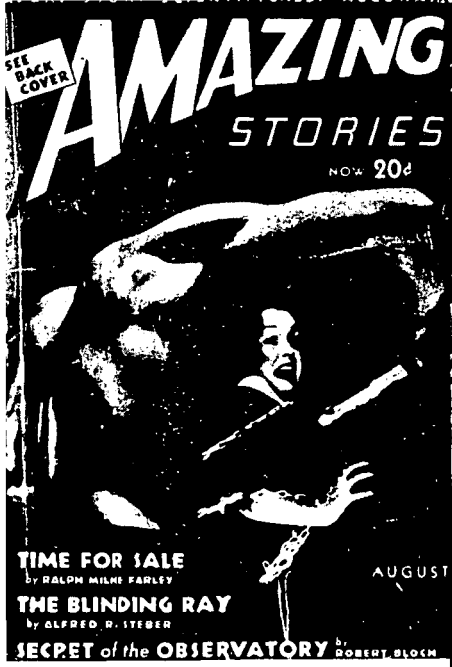
We'd like all of you to get involved, too. Please write and tell us what kind of stories you would like to see in future issues. And send us your manuscripts ... we are anxious to showcase outstanding new writers for everyone's benefit.

We can only wish that after reading the new, "old" Amazing Stories that you will feel like Isaac Asimov who reminisces about the early days thusly:

"I have known other joys ... the sales of stories, the discovery of sexual love, the earning of advanced degrees, the sight of my newborn children ... but none of them have been so unalloyed, as all pervasive as through and through as reaching out for a new issue of a science fiction magazine, grasping it, holding it, opening it, reading it, reading it, reading it ..."

Amen.

Arthur Bernhard, Publisher



OUR UNSTABLE HUGO GERNSBACK

comparatively short period of time after the earth had taken on a crust. During that time, such cataclysms as the Flood, the Ice Age and many others occurred at intervals and each time much of the population of the earth of that period was wiped out. Such cataclysms as the Flood, for instance, are not just Biblical; they are based upon solid fact of which science has excellent proofs today.

In a recent scientific article, I gave a new theory of the Flood. I pointed out that the Noachian flood may well have been caused by a wandering celestial body, which coming close within some thousands of miles of the earth, would have affected our oceans to such an extent, that they would have raced around the earth inundating practically everything. After the celestial body drew away once more, the flood receded. Of course, most of man's handiwork was wiped out by this flood, as it was by others. The same is true of the Ice Age, of the periodical upheavals of the earth crust and the consequent burying of everything that existed on the surface of our Planet.

One thing is certain; these upheavals and cataclysms are nothing unusual in the history of our earth. Even our present day earthquakes—tiny as they are—are an excellent proof that the world is not stable and may not be for billions of years to come. Right now, the thickness of the solid crust of the earth may be compared to the thickness of an orange peel in relation to the rest of the orange.

I have made these introductory remarks, simply to point out that our present civilization and so-called high culture may have occurred dozens and even hundreds of times in the actual history of this Planet. I even go further and assert that our present so-called high civilization has been eclipsed by far, many times, during the past

One of the remarkable deficiencies of the human makeup is the fact that so little attention is given to the unstability of the world upon which we live. I use the word "upon" purposely, for the following reason:

It is known to science—and geology readily proves it—that the age of the earth's crust, since it has cooled down, is at least one and one-half billion years. Science teaches us that living beings actually roamed on this Planet over 200,000,000 years ago. The first humans, such as we know them—that is, prehistoric man—probably date back some 500,000 years. During this interval of time, which is large as far as we humans are concerned—but trifling in geological time—many things have happened to the earth's crust.

We need not be concerned about what happened to the earth billions of years ago, before it had solidified and was able to sustain life, but will concern ourselves only with the

Keynoting our celebration of AMAZING'S "Golden Age" is, appropriately, this timeless editorial by the man who started it all, Hugo Gernsback. His provocative speculations make a lot of sense today, but he was probably light years ahead of his readers in 1928.

history of our Planet. It is even possible that such civilization may not have been at all a civilization of humans, but may have been some other form that we can only dimly guess at.

After every major upheaval, of course, all traces of civilization are wiped out completely. Such an upheaval may be so tremendous, as to turn everything from the surface of the earth topsy-turvy to an extent of some several miles deep. For that reason, nothing from a previous civilization could remain. Suppose every human being on earth were to be killed by the gases of some wandering comet today *without* any accompanying upheaval. How much of our present civilization would remain after 50,000 years? The destructive forces of the elements, such as rain, wind, storms and water, would level everything in less than a thousand years. At the end of 50,000 years, nothing would remain perhaps, except in subterranean cavities, providing no moisture had gotten into them. Ten thousand years, after all is only a ridiculously small fraction of time in the life of our Planet. It is at the rate of a thousandth of a second as compared to the beginning of the human era. In other words it is practically nothing.

So we have the spectacle, that there is nothing at all stable in our world; that everything comes and goes and is replaced by something else; that the humans who now reign and are masters of the earth, were at best only an accident. After our civilization vanishes and the world becomes habitable once more, the chances are all against it that a succeeding civilization will be similar to ours; it might be some super-insect or some other form that we cannot at all

imagine. These, of course, are radical ideas, but not half as radical as the actual history of this Planet tends to show. Life itself presents such a tremendous amount of variety, that anything in the way of life on this Planet is within the bounds of possibility.

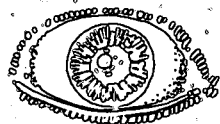
It probably takes an average of a quarter of a million years to develop human intelligence, as we know it. But we should distinguish between various kinds of intelligences. Many scientists, for instance, think that the ant surpasses us greatly in intelligence. Ants know how to govern themselves far better than we do. They exceed us in common sense a dozen different ways. Furthermore, different terrestrial conditions will make for different sorts of intelligences. It is quite possible, that during one of the major upheavals, atmospheric and temperature conditions were totally different and perhaps will be totally different again after the next major upheaval.

Human beings, as we know them today, might not be able to maintain themselves under such conditions. Yet it is certain, that given sufficient time, some high intelligence will arise, to become master of this Planet. As the Planet grows in age, these upheavals will become less and less frequent, because the earth's crust continues to become thicker. There is always the possibility that some exterior influence, such as a wandering celestial body may cause tremendous disturbances, but these seem to be comparatively rare and possibly do not happen more than once in a hundred million years, if that often. (C)



beyond the universe

By Stanton Coblenz



NOT TO BE REPRODUCED WITHOUT PERMISSION
FROM THE PUBLISHERS



Man's perception of time has provided science fiction one of its most fascinating speculative themes, out of which all kinds of time travel have been explored (usually via some kind of "Time Machine"). This piece offers something a little different. If you are into astral-projection you will appreciate this rather sophisticated-for-its-day vision of a trek through time. Of course, our hero may just have been hallucinating??

ACROSS ETERNITY

Ranging the timeless, starry halls of space,
I saw the planets, each a bead of light,
Go whirling round, in pirouetting flight,
Across the heavens' firefly-glinting face;
While the moon—radiant mansion of our race,
Swift-circling as a top amid the night,
Twisted and spun; then waned before my sight,
Turned ember-red, and passed without a trace.
But not a ripple stirred the twinkling void;
The suns and systems swung about the gloom,
Lone and unaltered; silvery fires of birth
Glared from a nebulous mist; and worlds destroyed
Strewed sparks and ashes ... till, from out their tomb
Rose the pale orb of many a reborn earth.

—Stanton A. Coblentz.

Ever since I was seventeen, I have been obsessed by a strange idea. Even during my freshman year at college, at a time when my companions were more interested in baseball, football and the fair sex, I was pursued, tantalized, almost persecuted by a belief which kept cropping up despite every effort I made to forget it. It was as if some implacable demon had taken hold of me; my thoughts kept turning to the subject of time and space, and of fourth dimensional expanses; and though I had not yet heard of Einstein, I had worked out a theory of relativity whose implications went beyond those of the famous German savant.

How the original notion came to me I do not know; but I became convinced that not only was there no absolute measuring rod for time and space, but that the human mind might under certain conditions transcend both space and time as we know them, might perceive eons in the lapse of what we now regard as seconds, or seconds in the lapse of what we regard as eons; and, similarly, might rise to gaze upon the Milky Way as one gazes on a thimble, or dwindle to see an atom as we see the starry firmament. There were innumerable factors which confirmed this view in my mind, although originally it had come to me more by intuition than by reasoning; the known illusory qualities of sense perception, and the fact that light-rays may be magnified indefinitely by the microscope and telescope; the existence of

micro-organisms which though their consciousness be but rudimentary, must be aware of spatial units too minute for our own apprehension; the fact that insects, with their agile movements and their innumerable wing-beats each second, are evidently attuned to a different time-perception than ours; the phenomenon of sleep, which causes time to pass immeasurably faster than during our waking hours, and yet may give us a long-protracted dream within a moment; the prodigious speed of the waves of light and electricity, which seem adjusted to a different spatial universe than that of our crawling earth-lives; and, finally, the tremendous reaches of past time and the almost inconceivable distances of the stellar universe, which would argue for the possibility of a mind that can look across ages and light-years, as we look upon the life and movements of a Mayfly.

This did not mean, of course, that any human mind would ever be able to attain such powers. Yet was it not possible that, if one could slip into another dimension; if one could pass beyond the limitations of our earth-bound bodies and perceptions; if one could glance down upon the whole time-space scheme, instead of regarding it, so to speak horizontally, one might be able literally to peer upon the universe as upon an apple in the palm of one's hand, and might see the centuries and milleniums roll by like ripples on the surface of a stream? To rise to the height and breadth and length of the universe! to see all, to know all, to be a spectator of all the worlds and ages! — such was the grandiose scheme which I formed, and to the consummation of which I consecrated my life.

It is little wonder, therefore, that my companions regarded me as a trifle odd. It is little wonder that they thought me slightly "cracked," when, as a student, I would stay home absorbed in philosophy or would devote myself to investigating some obscure drug in the "chem" laboratory, instead of joining them at a track meet or dance. And it is even less wonder if my colleagues stared at me suspiciously when, after my appointment to an instructorship in chemistry at Bradford College, I still went my eccentric way alone, giving myself to solitary studies and to secret experiments that often would occupy me half the night. From the beginning, I had learned that it was futile to attempt to take any one into my confidence, since my companions would begin by gaping at me as if doubting my sanity, and would end by advising me to "forget my day-dreams." Hence it was a lonely course that I pursued on the way to discovering the greatest of all truths.

Yet I labored persistently, since from the beginning I had not

been without a valuable clue. Each human being, it seemed to me, was like a clock timed by nature to run at a certain speed: to perceive the hours and years pass by at a particular rate, to observe space from a particular vantage-point. Change the basic speed of the machinery, however, and one might look upon another dimension: time might be by us at ten times, a hundred times, a hundred thousand times its present rate; space might dwindle to a tenth, a millionth, a million millionths of its present dimensions! But how could this be accomplished? Obviously, by some chemical that would affect the nervous system in such a way as to upset the present gearing of the mechanism. This was already done to some extent, as I knew, by certain drugs, such as hashish, which might seem to prolong time incalculably; but it was necessary to achieve the results on a far vaster scale than anything hitherto attained.

It was to this problem that I gave myself for the better part of twenty years. Often the difficulties in my path appeared insuperable; yet slowly I overcame them all, and by degrees was moving toward success. Through experiments with animals I had ascertained that a combination of morphine, belladonna, and certain rare organic salts, in carefully measured proportions, would affect the nervous system in such a way as to obliterate all common ideas of time and space. Dogs subjected to the combination seemed to fall into a sort of trance in which they were actively alive (heart-beat and respiration were nearly normal, eyes were wide-open and staring, occasional growls issued from their throats); yet they were unaware of the scenes about them, and, upon regaining their faculties, seemed like creatures tormented by bad dreams. Cats and guinea pigs, in their own way, reacted similarly; and one of my laboratory assistants, who chanced to inhale an incautious whiff of the concoction, went off into ecstatic visions like those of an opium smoker, and revived to tell of a dream of seeing the earth dwindle to the size of a pebble swift-whirling through space ... Clearly, I had no cause to be discouraged!

To report my innumerable precautions and counter-precautions would be to drag out this narrative needlessly; let me therefore pass on to the extraordinary climax of my twenty years of research. Let me tell of that adventure which, unique in human experience, would have justified not only twenty years of effort, but fifty, sixty, or a hundred!

So, at least, I have always maintained, although I know that there are many who think otherwise. To me it seemed that I was reaping a fit return for two decades of toil, when at length I had

perfected the formula of my time-space drug and stood ready to perform the experiment that would finally demonstrate its efficacy.

How to secure suitable assistants for the experiments was at first something of a problem. But, after some delay, I managed to corral two fellow chemists, and, on a never-to-be-forgotten thirteenth of November two years ago, induced them to accompany me to my rooms to witness an unusual scientific experiment. Little did they realize how unusual it was to be!

They looked at me a little queerly, I know, as I went through the preliminaries; they passed many annoying questions as to the inhalator I had rigged up, and the arrangement which permitted me while lying on my couch, to breathe the fumes produced by a solution of the time-space drug and conveyed to my nostrils through rubber tubes from the large glass generator at the further end of the room. "What's the matter, Harrington?" I remember one of them asking, with an attempt at jocularly that did not quite conceal his puzzled frown. "Getting ready for an operation?"

"Looks that way!" agreed the other. "Can't you smell the ether?"

"Will you gentlemen please be serious?" I demanded, turning on them with not a little irritation. And then, after they had sobered down a little, I instructed them, "I've brought you here to see that, after the gas-tube has been placed between my lips, it remains tightly in place for half an hour and then is removed. During the interval, I want you to take exact note of my appearance and reactions. That is all! We may now begin!"

Having arrayed myself in a loose cotton robe, a little like a nightshirt, I stretched myself out on the couch, took a long breath, reached for the gas tube, and—while my assistants stared at me wide-eyed—thrust the rubber nozzle firmly between my lips, and pulled down the gas-release lever.

Instantly the room and my two helpers faded from my vision. Instantly I was overcome by a delicious, exquisite sensation, as though I had drunk of some divine elixir, which produced a feeling of unutterable lightness in my limbs, a sense of well-being such as one experiences on reviving from a refreshing dream. At the same time, I had the impression of rising from my couch, and of moving through great distances with tempestuous velocity. It seemed that all about me was fog and vastness; it seemed that I fled through limitless, labyrinthine corridors; it seemed that a gigantic door slammed shut behind me—and then, as by slow degrees my senses cleared, it came to me that I had stepped out upon another dimension!

I do not claim it was the fourth dimension—it may have been the fifth, sixth or seventh—all that I know is that it gave me a range and power of perception, inconceivable to the ordinary earth-bound man. I found myself—or, rather, some projection of me—suddenly free of the limited vistas of three-dimensional space. I found myself released from my five chained bodily senses; I could see far through time and immensity. It was as if some all-enveloping vision had come to me; I was outside the earth, staring down at our world, which resembled a luminous whirling marble against the satiny black void; staring down at the whole Solar System, whose lighted spheres swung in their orbits about the blazing yellow-white ball that dwarfed them all by its size and fierce brilliancy. Even as I gazed, years and centuries went by; the earth swung in innumerable revolutions about the central orb, and the larger bulks of Jupiter and Saturn whirled through scores of their protracted years, nearly twelve years for Jupiter and nearly thirty years for Saturn.

Yes! even as I gazed, generations were born on our planet, generations were reared and passed away, wars were fought, dynasties toppled, nations crumpled and fell apart ...

But while these visions came to me, the scale and scope of the spectacle was ever altering. It seemed that time kept moving faster and faster; the planets were rushing about the sun at a constantly accelerated speed, until the revolutions of the earth became rapid as the gyrations of a summer gnat. And, simultaneously, space appeared to be contracting; the Solar System grew smaller and smaller, until its minor fragments were lost from view and there remained only the sun, whose pea-like disk glared from the remote obscurity.

Now the heavens themselves seemed to be drawing down to meet me; I was flying off into the heart of the Milky Way, which moved near with a velocity both terrifying and enthralling. Fascinated, I found myself in the midst of blazing star clusters, whose myriad suns stared out at me like the jewels of some radiant tiara; with an incommunicable ecstasy, I peered into the abysses of vast gaseous nebulae, all cloudy-shaped and mysteriously glowing; ravished with joy, I gazed at the giant suns, Arcturus and Betelgeuse, and the red Antares, and at systems of double and triple and quadruple suns with their streams of planets strewn about them through the black void. And all the while I rose and rose and rose, and time—as measured by the movements of the stars—seemed to go by more rapidly; while space—as measured by their dimensions—seemed ever to be contracting.

The spellbound rapture I felt had mounted to delirium by the time the Milky Way itself had dwindled before me to the apparent size of a lighted window in space; and the whole vast system, with its hundreds of millions of suns and its distances of hundreds of thousands of light-years, had taken on the blurred complexion and the crab-like features of a spiral nebula. But still out and out and out through the silences of immensity I winged my way. Other spiral nebulae appeared, growing larger as I approached, then receding and disappearing to misty points; whole colonies of spiral nebulae, whole galaxies of suns, Milky Ways and super-Milky Ways never reached by the most piercing earthly lens, became visible to my dazzled sight, each constituting no more than a glowworm glimmer against the illimitable night. And there, too, rapidly diminished, until they had all vanished and I seemed to have touched the edge of absolute blackness, from which there proceeded no flicker, no gleam, no motion—the dead blank beyond the living universe, the nothingness at the borders of space!

As I reached this impenetrable verge, my ecstasy mounted to a climax. "Behold!" I seemed to say to myself. "I have become mighty as the cosmos! I have seen through centuries and eons of time! I have voyaged across infinity to its furthest limits! I am mighty as all creation! I am great as God Himself!"

No sooner had I conceived this thought than a chastening answer came from within myself. "Ah, no, little mite, you are still puny as an atom!" And as this reflection thrust itself at me, I seemed to be moving through that blackness beyond the universe—out, out through the further gloom at a velocity beyond the power of words to express or of mind to conceive. Then, after a long, terrorizing interval, other lights began to glimmer out of the distance. And as I drew nearer and could distinguish their outlines, I was as one overwhelmed by a sight too prodigious for comprehension.

I could make out the pale, glowing forms not of hundreds but of thousands, tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of minute spiral nebulae, each a galaxy composed of myriads of suns. And these galaxies were themselves combined into a galaxy of galaxies, in which each individual Milky Way was as a separate star. More than that! as my vision expanded, I apprehended that the super-galaxy was itself but a mote in an infinitely larger galaxy of super-galaxies, which itself was apparently—

But here my vision halted. Having traversed the whole visible universe, I had indeed explored but an atom, a mere infinitesimal

part of an incomprehensible vastitude. Had I not been like Tantalus reaching for the fruit that ever retreated for his clasp? Suddenly a great feeling of weariness, of smallness, of futility overcame me; the light of the galaxies faded from my sight; in my ears there was a roaring as of a whirlwind; my mind became vague and confused, something seemed to have snapped within me, and I felt as if dropping through bottomless distances.

When I opened my eyes again, it was to see the sunlight glaring on the walls of a whitewashed room. I was lying on a little cot; at my side sat a white-robed woman who looked down at me solicitously, "Take it easy. Do not exert yourself," I thought I heard her murmur. "You are still very weak."

As she uttered these words, I let my eyes rove about the room, until they chanced to rest on a calendar that hung near the door. "May 13," I read. Could it be that I was dreaming? When I had performed the experiment, it had been November!

Only by degrees did the distressing facts dawn upon my dazed senses. I was in a hospital — that much was apparent; but at first I did not realize that it was not an ordinary hospital—it was a ward for the insane! Since the moment of the fateful experiment, six months had elapsed! Six months while my mind had wandered the mazes of another dimension! At the expiration of the specified thirty minutes, no efforts of my assistants had sufficed to bring me out of the deep trance into which I had entered; nor was any subsequent medical attention of the slightest avail. I lay as if close to death, except that from time to time my lips would utter some broken gibberish about stars, galaxies, and nebulae. Hence it had been concluded that I was suffering from some rare form of dementia, and, kept alive by artificial feeding, I was taken to the insane ward. Evidently, in my enthusiasm, I had absorbed an overdose of the time-space drug!

It was with great difficulty that, upon regaining my strength, I convinced the hospital authorities that I was really sane and harmless and might be allowed my liberty. Even so, my friends persisted in believing that I had been out of my head; and no efforts on my part have yet persuaded an incredulous world that I was actually away in another dimension, exploring the far reaches of time and space. It is in order that my case may be more fully understood and the importance of my invention appreciated, that I am entrusting this record to writing. As for the time-space drug—I still retain the formula, and shall be delighted to supply it to any interested person. I have often been

tempted to use it again myself; but have resisted the impulse, out of fear that uninformed witnesses might misinterpret the results and condemn me to a lunatic asylum for life. ©

AMAZING FACTS

Far more amazing than many of our wildest conjectures are some scientific truths few of us ever think about.

Have you ever pondered just how we fit into the scheme of the universe in terms of the awesome vista of time that has preceded us? Prominent astronomer Dr. Carl Sagan in his book, "The Dragons of Eden," creates a "cosmic calendar" to illustrate our own relative insignificance within this vast framework of time.

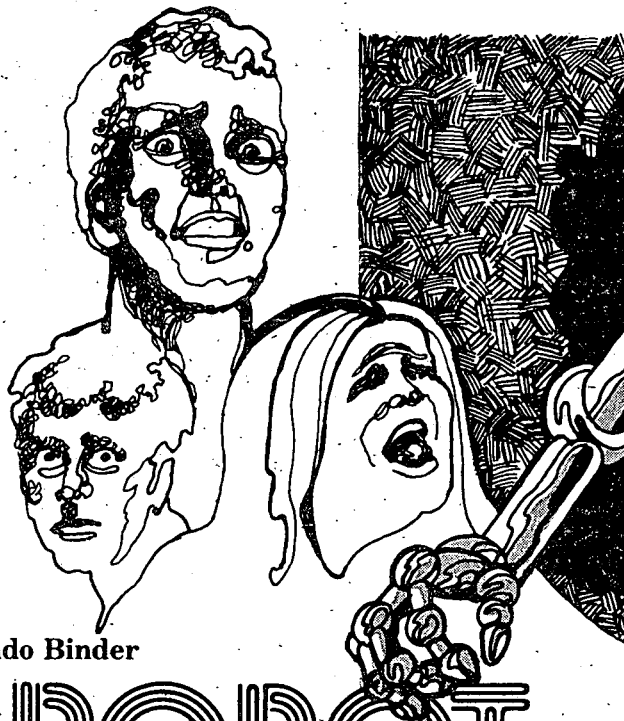
The best estimates mark the beginning of our universe with a "Big Bang," some fifteen billion years ago. Dr. Sagan has us imagine that these eons are compressed into the span of a single year. This would mean that every billion years of earth history would correspond to about 24 days of our hypothetical "cosmic year," and one second of that year would equal 475 real revolutions of the earth around the sun.

The calendar he devises charts all important geological developments as well as those moments when life first appeared. It is humbling indeed to read that during our "cosmic year" the earth does not even appear in the universe until early September; dinosaurs on Christmas Eve; flowers on December 28; men and women at 10:30 p.m., New Year's Eve; and that all of recorded history occupies the *last ten seconds* of December 31!

*"What seest thou else
in the dark backward and
abysm of time."*

*Wm. Shakespeare
The Tempest*

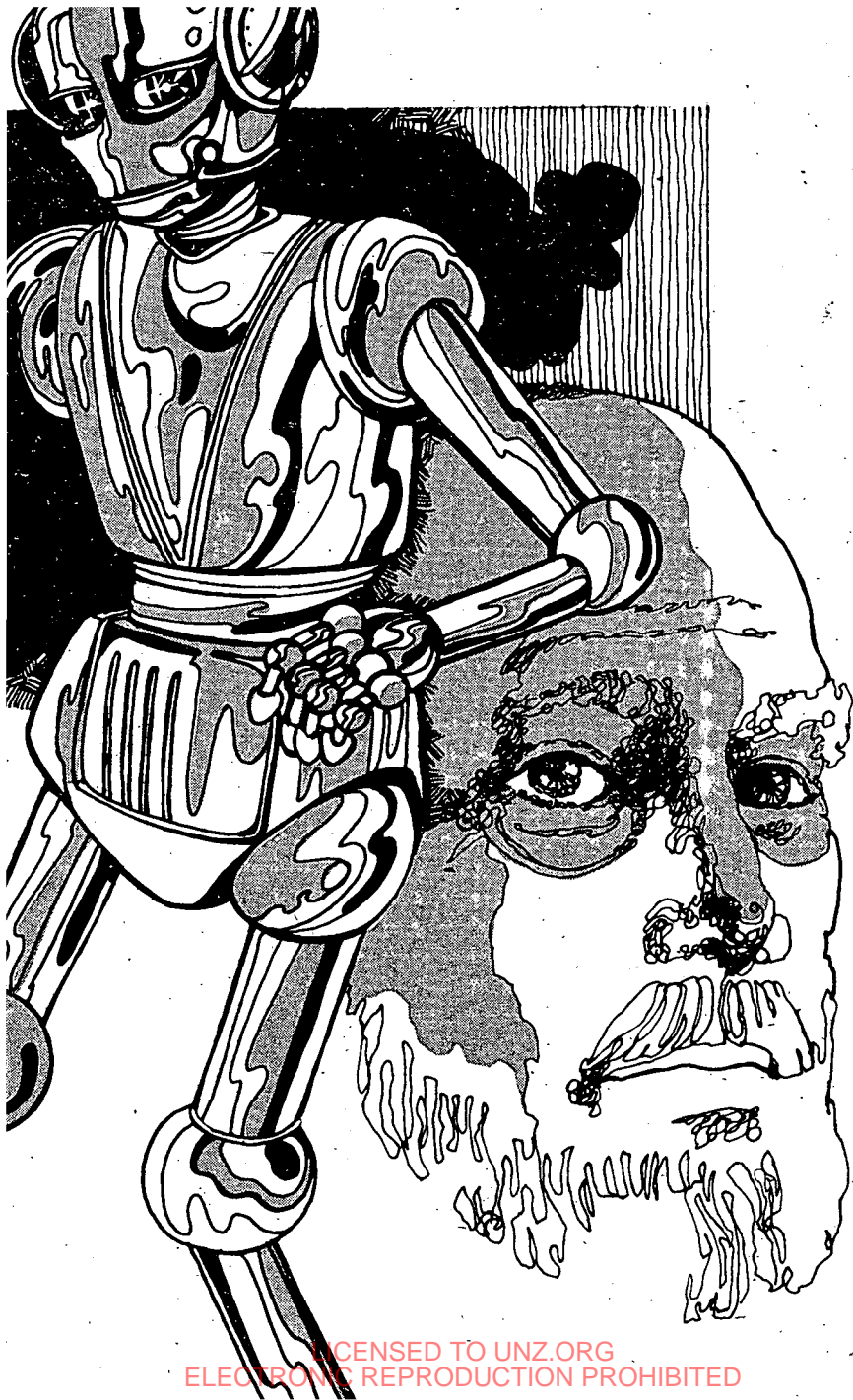
(The first, original use of this title)



By Eando Binder

I, ROBOT

This classic robot, Adam Link, is the grand-daddy of all robots who were endowed with human feelings along with their super intelligence. Isn't it much easier to sympathize with a computer-brain when it displays a capacity for emotion along with a sense of right and wrong? Far better to deal with something so much smarter and stronger if it shares at least some of our frailties. People's initial reaction to robots never seem very happy affairs, though, because of that other human attribute prejudice. But, someday, who knows, maybe even some of your best friends may be robots!



MUCH of what has occurred puzzles me. But I think I am beginning to understand now. You call me a monster, but you are wrong. Utterly wrong!

I will try to prove it to you, in writing. I hope I have time to finish—

I will begin at the beginning. I was born, or created, six months ago, on November 3 of last year. I am a true robot. I am made of wires and wheels, not flesh and blood.

My first recollection of consciousness was a feeling of being chained, and I was. For three days before then, I had been seeing and hearing, but all in a jumble. Now, I had the urge to arise and peer more closely at the strange, moving form that I had seen so many times before me, making sounds.

The moving form was Dr. Link, my creator. He was the only thing that moved, of all the objects within my sight. He and one other object—his dog Terry. Therefore these two objects held my interest more. I hadn't yet learned to associate movement with life.

But on this fourth day, I wanted to approach the two moving shapes and make noises at them. Particularly at the smaller one. His noises were challenging, stirring. They made me want to rise and quiet them. But I was chained. I was held down by them so that, in my blank state of mind, I wouldn't wander off and bring myself to an untimely end, or harm someone.

These things, of course, Dr. Link explained to me later, when I could dissociate my thoughts and understand. I was just like a baby for those three days—a human baby. I am not as other so-called robots were—mere automatized machines designed to obey certain commands or arranged stimuli.

No, I was equipped with a pseudo-brain that could receive *all* stimuli that human brains could. And with possibilities of eventually learning to rationalize for itself.

But for three days Dr. Link was very anxious about my brain. I was like a human baby and yet I was also like a sensitive, but unorganized, machine, subject to the whim of mechanical chance. My eyes turned when a bit of paper fluttered to the floor. But photoelectric cells had been made before capable of doing the same. My mechanical ears turned to best receive sounds from a certain direction, but any scientist could duplicate that trick with sonic-relays.

The question was—did my brain, to which the eyes and ears were connected, hold on to these various impressions for future use? Did I have, in short—*memory*?

THREE days I was like a newborn baby. And Dr. Link was like a worried father, wondering if his child had been born a hopeless idiot. But on the fourth day, he feared I was a wild animal. I began to make rasping sounds with my vocal apparatus, in answer to the sharp little noises that the dog Terry made. I shook my swivel head at the same time, and strained against my bonds.

For a while, as Dr. Link told me, he was frightened of me. I seemed like nothing so much as an enraged jungle creature, ready to go berserk. He had more than half a mind to destroy me on the spot.

But one thing changed his mind and saved me.

The little animal, Terry, barking angrily, rushed forward suddenly. It probably wanted to bite me. Dr. Link tried to call it back, but too late. Finding my smooth metal legs adamant, the dog leaped with foolish bravery in my lap, to come at my throat. One of my hands grasped it by the middle, held it up. My metal fingers squeezed too hard and the dog gave out a pained squeal.

Instantaneously, my hand opened to let the creature escape! Instantaneously. My brain had interpreted the sound for what it was. A long chain of memory-association had worked. Three days before, when I had first been brought to life, Dr. Link had stepped on Terry's foot accidentally. The dog had squealed its pain. I had seen Dr. Link, at risk of losing his balance, instantly jerk up his foot. Terry had stopped squealing.

Terry squealed when my hand tightened. He would stop when I untightened. Memory-association. The thing psychologists call reflexive reaction. A sign of a living brain.

Dr. Link tells me he let out a cry of pure triumph. He knew at a stroke I had memory. He knew I was not a wanton monster. He knew I had a thinking organ, and a first-class one. Why? Because I had reacted *instantaneously*. You will realize what that means later.

I LEARNED to walk in three hours. Dr. Link was still taking somewhat of a chance, unbinding my chains. He had no assurance that I would not just blunder away like a witless machine. But he knew he had to teach me to walk before I could learn to talk. The same as he knew he must bring my brain alive fully connected to the appendages and pseudo-organs it was later to use.

If he had simply disconnected my legs and arms for those first three days, my awakening brain would never have been able to use them when connected later. Do you think, if you were

suddenly endowed with a third arm, that you could ever use it? Why does it take a cured paralytic so long to regain the use of his natural limbs? Mental blind spots in the brain: Dr. Link had all those strange psychological twists figured out.

Walk first. Talk next. That is the tried-and-true rule used among humans since the dawn of their species. Human babies learn best and fastest that way. And I was a human baby in mind, if not body.

Dr. Link held his breath when I first essayed to rise. I did, slowly, swaying on my metal legs. Up in my head, I had a three-directional spirit-level electrically contacting my brain. It told me automatically what was horizontal, vertical and oblique. My first tentative step, however, wasn't a success. My knee-joints flexed in reverse order. I clattered to my knees, which fortunately were knobbed with thick protective plates so that the more delicate swiveling mechanisms behind weren't harmed.

Dr. Link says I looked up at him like a startled child might. Then I promptly began walking along on my knees, finding this easy. Children would do this more only that it hurts them. I know no hurt.

After I roved up and down the aisles of his workshop for an hour, nicking up his furniture terribly, walking on my knees seemed completely natural. Dr. link was in a quandary how to get me up to my full height. He tried grasping my arm and pulling me up, but my 300 pounds of weight were too much for him.

My own rapidly increasing curiosity solved the problem. Like a child discovering the thrill of added height with stilts, my next attempt to rise to my full height pleased me. I tried staying up. I finally mastered the technique of alternate use of limbs and shift of weight forward.

In a couple of hours Dr. link was leading me up and down the gravel walk around his laboratory. On my legs, it was quite easy for him to pull me along and thus guide me. Little Terry gamboled along at our heels, barking joyfully. The dog had accepted me as a friend.

I was by this time quite docile to Dr. Link's guidance. My impressionable mind had quietly accepted him as a necessary rein and check. I did, he told me later, make tentative movements in odd directions off the path, motivated by vague stimuli, but his firm arm pulling me back served instantly to keep me in line. He paraded up and down with me as with an irresponsible oaf.

I would have kept on walking tirelessly for hours, but Dr. Link's burden of years quickly fatigued him and he led me inside.

When he had safely gotten me seated in my metal chair, he

clicked the switch on my chest that broke the electric current giving me life. And for the fourth time I knew that dreamless non-being which corresponded to my creator's periods of sleep.

My Education

IN three days I learned to talk reasonably well.

I give Dr. Link as much credit as myself. In those three days he pointed out the names of all objects in the laboratory and around. This fund of two hundred or so nouns he supplemented with as many verbs of action as he could demonstrate. Once heard and learned, a word never again was forgotten or obscured to me. Instantaneous comprehension. Photographic memory. Those things I had.

It is difficult to explain. Machinery is precise, unvarying. I am a machine. Electrons perform their tasks instantaneously. Electrons motivate my metallic brain.

Thus, with the intelligence of a child of five at the end of those three days, Dr. Link taught me to read. My photoelectric eyes instantly grasped the connection between speech and letter, as my mentor pointed them out. Thought-association filled in the gaps of understanding. I perceived without delay that the word "lion," for instance, pronounced in its peculiar way, represented a live animal crudely pictured in the book I have never seen a lion. But I would know one the instant I did.

From primers and first-readers I graduated in less than a week to adult books. Dr. Link laid out an extensive reading course for me, in his large library. It included fiction as well as factual matter. Into my receptive, retentive brain began to be poured a fund of information and knowledge never before equalled in that short period of time.

There are other things to consider besides my "birth" and "education." First of all the housekeeper. She came in once a week to clean up the house for Dr. Link. He was a recluse, lived by himself, cooked for himself. Retired on an annuity from an invention years before.

The housekeeper had seen me in the process of construction in the past years, but only as an inanimate caricature of a human body. Dr. Link should have known better. When the first Saturday of my life came around, he forgot it was the day she came. He was absorbedly pointing out to me that "to run" meant to go faster than "to walk."

"Demonstrate," Dr. Link asked as I claimed understanding. Obediently, I took a few slow steps before him. "walking," I

said. Then I retreated a ways and lumbered forward again, running for a few steps. The stone floor clattered under my metallic feet.

"Was—that—right?" I asked in my rather stentorian voice.

At that moment a terrified shriek sounded from the doorway. The housekeeper came up just in time to see me perform.

She screamed, making more noise than even I. "It's the Devil himself! Run, Dr. Link—run! Police—Help—"

She fainted dead away. He revived her and talked soothingly to her, trying to explain what I was, but he had to get a new housekeeper. After this he contrived to remember when Saturday came and on that day kept me hidden in a storeroom reading books.

A trivial incident in itself, perhaps, but very significant, as you who will read this will agree.

TWO MONTHS after my awakening to life, Dr. Link one day spoke to me in a fashion other than as teacher to pupil; spoke to me as man to—man.

"You are the result of twenty years of effort," he said, "and my success amazes even me. You are little short of being a human in mind. You are a monster, a creation, but you are basically human. You have no heredity. Your environment is molding you. You are the proof that mind is an electrical phenomenon, molded by environment. In human beings, their bodies—called heredity—are environment. But out of you I will make a mental wonder!"

His eyes seemed to burn with a strange fire, but this softened as he went on.

"I knew I had something unprecedented and vital twenty years ago when I perfected an iridium-sponge sensitive to the impact of a single electron. It was the sensitivity of thought! Mental currents in the human brain are of this micro-magnitude. I had the means now of duplicating mind-currents in an artificial medium. From that day to this I worked on the problem.

"It was not long ago that I completed your 'brain'—an intricate complex of iridium-sponge cells. Before I brought it to life, I had your body built by skilled artisans. I wanted you to begin life equipped to live and move in it as nearly in the human way as possible. How eagerly I awaited your debut into the world!"

His eyes shone.

"You surpassed my expectations. You are not merely a thinking robot. A metal man. You are—life! A new kind of life. You can be trained to think, to reason, to perform. In the future,

your kind can be of inestimable aid to man and his civilization. You are the first of your kind."

The days and weeks slipped by. My mind matured and gathered knowledge steadily from Dr. Link's library. I was able, in time, to scan and absorb a page at a time of reading matter, as readily as human eyes scan lines. You know of the television principle—a pencil of light moving hundreds of times a second over the object to be transmitted. My eyes, triggered with speedy electrons, could do the same. What I read was absorbed—memorized—instantly. From then on it was part of my knowledge.

Scientific subjects particularly claimed my attention. There was always something indefinable about human things, something I could not quite grasp, but science digested easily, in my science-compounded brain. It was not long before I knew all about myself and why I "ticked," much more fully than most humans know why they live, think and move.

Mechanical principles became starkly simple to me. I made suggestions for improvements in my own make-up that Dr. Link readily agreed upon correcting. We added little universals in my fingers, for example, that made them almost as supple as their human models.

Almost, I say. The human body is a marvelously perfected organic machine. No robot will ever equal it in sheer efficiency and adaptability. I realized my limitations.

Perhaps you will realize what I mean when I say that my eyes cannot see colors. Or rather, I see just one color, in the blue range. It would take an impossibly complex series of units, bigger than my whole body, to enable me to see all colors. Nature has packed all that in two globes the size of marbles, for *her* robots. He had a billion years to do it. Dr. Link only has twenty years.

But my brain, that was another matter. Equipped with only the two senses of one-color sight and limited sound, it was yet capable of garnishing a full experience. Smell and taste are gastronomic senses. I do not need them. Feeling is a device of Nature's to protect a fragile body. My body is not fragile.

Sight and sound are the only two cerebral senses. Einstein,

colorblind, half-dead, and with deadened senses of taste, smell and feeling would still have been Einstein—mentally.

Sleep is only a word to me. When Dr. Link knew he could trust me to take care of myself, he dispensed with the nightly habit of "turning me off." While he slept, I spent the hours reading.

He taught me how to remove the depleted storage battery in the pelvic part of my metal frame when necessary and replace it with a fresh one. This had to be done every 48 hours. Electricity is my life and strength. It is my food. Without it I am so much metal junk.

But I have explained enough of myself. I suspect that ten thousand more pages of description would make no difference in your attitude, you who are even now—

An amusing thing happened one day, not long ago. Yes, I can be amused too. I cannot laugh, but my brain can appreciate the ridiculous. Dr. Link's perennial gardener came to the place, unannounced. Searching for the doctor to ask how he wanted the hedges cut, the man came upon us in the back, walking side by side for Dr. Link's daily light exercise.

The gardener's mouth began speaking and then ludicrously gaped open and stayed that way as he caught a full glimpse of me. But he did not faint in fright as the housekeeper had. He stood there, paralyzed.

"What's the matter, Charley?" queried Dr. Link sharply. He was so used to me that for the moment he had no idea why the gardener should be astonished.

"That—that thing!" gasped the man, finally.

"Oh. Well, it's a robot," said Dr. Link. "Haven't you ever heard of them? An intelligent robot. Speak to him, he'll answer."

After some urging, the gardener sheepishly turned to me. "H-how do you do, Mr. Robot," he stammered.

"How do you do, Mr. Charley," I returned promptly, seeing the amusement in Dr. Link's face. "Nice weather, isn't it?"

For a moment the man looked ready to shriek and run. But he squared his shoulders and curled his lip. "Trickery!" he scoffed. "That thing can't be intelligent. You've got a phonograph inside of it. How about the hedges?"

"I'm afraid," murmured Dr. Link with a chuckle, "that the robot is more intelligent than you, Charley!!" But he said it so the man didn't hear, and then directed how to trim the hedges. Charley didn't do a good job. He seemed too nervous all day.

My Fate

ONE DAY Dr. Link stared at me proudly.

"You have now," he said, "the intellectual capacity of a man of many years. Soon I'll announce you to the world. You shall take your place in our world, as an independent entity—as a citizen!"

"Yes, Dr. Link," I returned. "Whatever you say. You are my creator—my master."

"Don't think of it that way," he admonished. "In the same sense, you are my son. But a father is not a son's master after his maturity. You have gained that status." He frowned thoughtfully. "You must have a name! Adam! Adam Link!"

He faced me and put a hand on my shiny chromium shoulder. "Adam Link, what is your choice of future life?"

"I want to serve you, Dr. Link."

"But you will outlive me! And you may outlive several other masters!"

"I will serve any master who will have me," I said slowly. I had been thinking about this before. "I have been created by man. I will serve man."

Perhaps he was testing me. I don't know. But my answers obviously pleased him. "Now," he said, "I will have no fears in announcing you!"

The next day he was dead.

That was three days ago. I was in the storeroom, reading—it was housekeeper's day. I heard the noise. I ran up the steps, into the laboratory. Dr. Link lay with skull crushed. A loose angle-iron of a transformer hung on an insulated platform on the wall had slipped and crashed down on his head while he sat there before his workbench. I raised his head, slumped over the bench, to better see the wound. Death had been instantaneous.

These are the facts. I turned the angle-iron back myself. The blood on my fingers resulted when I raised his head, not knowing for the moment that he was stark dead. In a sense, I was responsible for the accident, for in my early days of walking I had once blundered against the transformer shelf and nearly torn it loose. We should have repaired it.

But that I am his murderer, as you all believe, is not true.

The housekeeper had also heard the noise and came from the house to investigate. She took one look. She saw me bending over the doctor, his head torn and bloody—she fled, too frightened to make a sound.

It would be hard to describe my thoughts. The little dog Terry sniffed at the body, sensed the calamity, and went down on his belly, whimpering. He felt the loss of a master. So did I. I am not sure what your emotion of sorrow is. Perhaps I cannot feel that deeply. But I do know that the sunlight seemed suddenly faded to me.

My thoughts are rapid. I stood there only a minute, but in that time I made up my mind to leave. This again has been misinterpreted. You considered that an admission of guilt, the criminal escaping from the scene of his crime. In my case it was a full-fledged desire to go out into the world, find a place in it.

Dr. Link, and my life with him, were a closed book. No use now to stay and watch ceremonials. He had launched my life. He was gone. My place now must be somewhere out in the world I had never seen. No thought entered my mind of what you humans would decide about me. I thought all men were like Dr. Link.

FIRST of all I took a fresh battery, replacing my half-depleted one. I would need another in 48 hours, but I was sure this would be taken care of by anyone to who I made the request.

I left. Terry followed me. He has been with me all the time. I have heard a dog is man's best friend. Even a metal man's.

My conceptions of geography soon proved hazy at best. I had pictured earth as teeming with humans and cities, with not much space between. I had estimated that the city Dr. Link spoke of must be just over the hill from his secluded country home. Yet the woods I traversed seemed endless.

It was not till hours later that I met the little girl. She had been dangling her bare legs into a brook, sitting on a flat rock. I approached to ask where the city was. She turned when I was still thirty feet away. My internal mechanisms do not run silently. They make a steady noise that Dr. Link always described as a handful of coins jingling together.

The little girl's face contorted as soon as she saw me. I must be a fearsome sight indeed in your eyes. Screaming her fear, she blindly jumped up, lost her balance and fell into the stream.

I knew what drowning was. I knew I must save her. I knelt at the rock's edge and reached down for her. I managed to grasp one of her arms and pull her up. I could feel the bones of her thin little wrist crack. I had forgotten my strength.

I had to grasp her little leg with my other hand, to pull her up. The livid marks showed on her white flesh when I laid her on the grass. I can guess now what interpretation was put on all this. A terrible, raving monster, I had tried to drown her and break her little body in wanton savageness!

You others of her picnic party appeared then, in answer to her cries. You women screamed and fainted. You men snarled and threw rocks at me. But what strange bravery imbued the woman, probably the child's mother, who ran up under my very feet to snatch up her loved one? I admired her. The rest of you I despised for not listening to my attempts to explain. You drowned out my voice with your screams and shouts.

"Dr. Link's robot!—it's escaped and gone crazy!—he shouldn't have made that monster!—get the police!—nearly killed poor Frances!—"

With these garbled shouts to one another, you withdrew. You didn't notice that Terry was barking angrily—at you. Can you fool a dog? We went on.

Now my thoughts really became puzzled. Here at last was something I could not rationalize. This was so different from the world I had learned about in books. What subtle things lay behind the printed words that I had read? What had happened to the sane and orderly world my mind had conjured for itself?

NIGHT came. I had to stop and stay still in the dark. I leaned against a tree motionlessly. For a while I heard little Terry snooping around in the brush for something to eat. I heard him gnawing something. Then later he curled up at my feet and slept. The hours passed slowly. My thoughts would not come to a conclusion about the recent occurrence. Monster! Why had they believed that?

Once, in the still distance, I heard a murmur as of a crowd of people. I saw some lights. They had significance the next day. At dawn I nudged Terry with my toe and we walked on. The same murmur arose, approached. Then I saw you, a crowd of you, men with clubs, scythes and guns. You spied me and a shout went up. You hung together as you advanced.

Then something struck my frontal plate with a sharp clang. One of you had shot.

"Stop! Wait!" I shouted, knowing I must talk to you, find out why I was being hunted like a wild beast. I had taken a step forward, hand upraised. But you would not listen. More shots rang out, denting my metal body. I turned and ran. A bullet in a vital spot would ruin me, as much as a human.

You came after me like a pack of hounds, but I outdistanced you, powered by steel muscles. Terry fell behind, lost. Then, as afternoon came, I realized I must get a newly charged battery. Already my limbs were moving sluggishly. In a few more hours,

without a new source of current within me, I would fall on the spot and—die.

And I did not want to die!

I knew I must find a road to the city. I finally came upon a winding dirt road and followed it in hope. When I saw a car parked at the side of the road ahead of me, I knew I was saved, for Dr. Link's car had the same sort of battery I used. There was no one around the car. Much as a starving man would take the first meal available, I raised the floorboards and in a short while had substituted batteries.

New strength coursed through my body. I straightened up just as two people came arm-in-arm from among the trees, a young man and woman. They caught sight of me. Incredulous shock came into their faces. The girl shrank into the boy's arms.

"Do not be alarmed," I said. "I will not harm you. I—"

There was no use going on, I saw that. The boy fainted dead away in the girl's arms and she began dragging him away, wailing hysterically.

I left. My thoughts from then on can best be described as brooding. I did not want to go to the city now. I began to realize I was an outcast in human eyes, from first sight on.

Just as night fell and I stopped, I heard a most welcome sound. Terry's barking! He came up joyfully, wagging his stump of tail. I reached down to scratch his ears. All these hours he had faithfully searched for me. He had probably tracked me by a scent of oil. What can cause such blind devotion—and to a metal man!

Is it because, as Dr. Link once stated, that the body, human or otherwise, is only part of the environment of the mind? And that Terry recognized in me as much of mind as in humans, despite my alien body? If that is so, it is you who are passing judgment on me as a monster who are in the wrong. And I am convinced it is so!

I hear you now—shouting outside—*beware that you do not drive me to be the monster you call me!*...

THE NEXT dawn precipitated you upon me again. Bullets flew. One struck the joint of my right knee, so that my leg twisted as I ran. One smashed into the right side of my head and shattered the tympanum there, making me deaf on that side.

But the bullet that hurt most was the one that killed Terry!

The shooter of that bullet was twenty yards away. I could have run to him broken his every bone with my hard, powerful hands.

Have you stopped to wonder why I didn't take revenge? Perhaps I should! . . .

I was hopelessly lost all that day. I went in circles through the endless woods. I was trying to get away from the vicinity, from your vengeance. Toward dusk I saw something familiar—Dr. Link's laboratory.

My birthplace! My six month's of life here whirled through my mind with kaleidoscopic rapidity. I wonder if my emotion was akin to what yours can be! Life may be all in the mind. Something gripped me there, throbbingly. The shadows made by a dim gas-jet I lit seemed to dance around me like little Terry had danced. Then I found the book, "Frankenstein," lying on the desk whose drawers had been emptied. Dr. Link's private desk. He had kept the book from me. Why? I read it now, in a half hour, by my page-at-a-time scanning. And then I understood!"

But it is the most stupid premise ever made: that a created man must turn against his creator, against humanity, lacking a soul. The book is all wrong.

Or is it? . . .

As I finish writing this, here among blasted memories, with the spirit of Terry in the shadows, I wonder if I shouldn't. . . .

It is close to dawn now. You have me surrounded, cut off. In the light you will rout me out. Your hatred lust is aroused. It will be sated only by my—death.

I have not been so badly damaged that I cannot still summon strength and power enough to ram through your lines and escape. But it would only be at the cost of several of your lives. And that is the reason I have my hand on the switch that can blink out my life with one twist.

Ironic, isn't it. I have the very feelings you are so sure I lack?
(signed) Adam Link.

If you thought this issue of AMAZING gave you reading pleasure and you want more—ask your newsdealer for FANTASTIC SF—sold at the same newsstand—striving to give you the best and most interesting reading.





DEVOLUTIO

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



by Edmond Hamilton

What if man, instead of being the culmination of thousands of years of evolution, is the ultimate degradation of a once super-race? Darwin would spin in his grave over this depiction of the "deterioration" of the species. Evolution, however, does depend upon mutations, which are inherently a very risky business. Makes you ponder.

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ROSS had ordinarily the most even of tempers, but four days of canoe travel in the wilds of North Quebec had begun to rasp it. On this, their fourth stop on the bank of the river to camp for the night, he lost control and for a few moments stood and spoke to his two companions in blistering terms.

His black eyes snapped and his darkly unshaven handsome young face worked as he spoke. The two biologists listened to him without reply at first. Gray's blond young countenance was indignant but Woodin, the older biologist, just listened impassively with his gray eyes level on Ross' angry face.

When Ross stopped for breath, Woodin's calm voice struck in. "Are you finished?"

Ross gulped as though about to resume his tirade, then abruptly got hold of himself. "Yes, I'm finished," he said sullenly.

"Then listen to me," said Woodin, like a middle-aged father admonishing a sulky child.

"You're working yourself up over nothing. Neither Gray nor I have made one complaint yet. Neither of us have said that we disbelieve what you told us."

"You haven't *said* you disbelieve, no!" Ross exclaimed with anger suddenly reflaring. "But don't you suppose I can tell what you're thinking?"

"You think I told you a crazy story about the things I saw from my plane, don't you? You think I dragged you two up here on a wild-geese chase, to look for incredible creatures that could never have existed. You believe that, don't you?"

"Oh, *damn* these mosquitoes!" said Gray, slapping viciously at his neck and staring with unfriendly eyes at the aviator.

Woodin took command. "We'll go over this after we've made camp. Jim, get out the duffle-bags. Ross, will you rustle firewood?"

They both glared at him and at each other but grudgingly they obeyed. The tension eased for a while.

By the time darkness fell on the little riverside clearing, the canoe was drawn up on the bank, their trim little balloon-silk tent had been erected, and a fire crackled in front of it. Gray fed the fire with fat knots of pine while Woodin cooked over it coffee, hot cakes and the inevitable bacon.

The firelight wavered feebly up toward the tall trunks of giant hemlocks that walled the little clearing on three sides. It lit up their three khaki-clad, stained figures and the irregular white block of the tent. It gleamed out there on the riffles of the McNorton, chuckling softly as it flowed on toward the Little Whale.

They ate silently, and as wordlessly cleaned the pans with bunches of grass. Woodin got his pipe going, the other two lit crumpled cigarettes, and then they sprawled for a time by the fire, listening to the chuckling, whispering river-sounds, the sighing sound of the higher hemlock branches, the lonesome cheeping of insects.

Woodin finally knocked his pipe out on his bootheel and sat up. "All right," he said, "now we'll settle this argument we were having."

Ross looked a little shamefaced. "I guess I got too hot about it," he said subduedly. Then added, "But all the same, you fellows do more than half disbelieve me."

Woodin shook his head calmly. "No, we don't Ross. When you told us that you'd seen creatures unlike anything ever heard of while flying over this wilderness, Gray and I both believed you.

"If we hadn't, do you think two busy biologists would have dropped their work to come up here with you into these unending woods and look for the things you saw?"

"I know, I know," said the aviator unsatisfiedly. "You think I saw something queer and you're taking a chance that it will be worth the trouble of coming up here after.

"But you don't believe what I've told you about the looks of the things. You think that sounds too queer to be true, don't you?"

For the first time Woodin hesitated in answering. "After all, Ross," he said indirectly, "one's eyes can play tricks when you're only glimpsing things for a moment from a plane a mile up."

"Glimpsing them?" echoed Ross. "I tell you, man, I saw them as clearly as I see you. A mile up, yes, but I had my big binoculars with me and was using them when I saw them.

"It was near here, too, just east of the forks of the McNorton and the Little Whale. I was streaking south in a hurry for I'd been three weeks up at that government mapping survey on Hudson's Bay. I wanted to place myself by the river forks so I brought my plane down a little and used my binoculars.

"Then, down there in a clearing by the river, I saw something glisten and saw — the things. I tell you, they were incredible, but just the same I saw them clear! I forgot all about the river-forks in the moment or two I stared down at them.

"They were big, glistening things like heaps of shining jelly, so translucent that I could see the ground through them. There were at least a dozen of them and when I saw them they were gliding across that little clearing, a floating, flowing movement.

"Then they disappeared under the trees. If there'd been a

clearing big enough to land in within a hundred miles I'd have landed and looked for them, but there wasn't and I had to go on. But I wanted like the devil to find out what they were and when I took the story to you two, you agreed to come up here by canoe to search for them. But I don't think now you've ever fully believed me."

WOODIN looked thoughtfully into the fire. "I think you saw something queer, all right, some queer form of life. That's why I was willing to come up on this search.

"But things such as you describe, jelly-like, translucent, gliding over the ground like that — there's been nothing like that since the first protoplasmic creatures, the beginning of life on earth, glided over our young world ages ago."

"If there were such things then, why couldn't they have left descendants like them?" Ross argued.

Woodin shook his head. "Because they all vanished ages ago, changed into different and higher forms of life, starting the great upward climb of life that has reached its height in man.

"Those long-dead, single-celled protoplasmic creatures were the start, the crude, humble beginnings of our life. They passed away and their descendants were unlike them. We men are their descendants."

Ross looked at him, frowning. "But where did they come from in the first place, those first living things?"

Again Woodin shook his head. "That is one thing we biologists do not know and can hardly speculate upon; the origin of those first protoplasmic forms of life.

"It's been suggested that they rose spontaneously from the chemicals of earth, yet this is disproved by the fact that no such things rise spontaneously *now* from inert matter. Their origin is still a complete mystery. But, however, they came into existence on earth, they were the first of life, our distant ancestors."

Woodin's eyes were dreaming, the other two forgotten, as he stared into the fire, seeing visions.

"What a glorious saga it is, that wonderful climb up from crude protoplasm creatures to man! A marvelous series of changes that has brought us from that first low form to our present splendor.

"And it might not have occurred on any other world but earth! For science is now almost sure that the cause of evolutionary mutations is the radiations of the radioactive deposits inside the earth, acting upon the genes of all living matter."

He caught a glimpse of Ross' uncomprehending face, and

despite his raptness smiled a little.

"I can see that means nothing to you. I'll try to explain. The germ-cell of every living thing on earth contains in it a certain number of small, rod-like things which are called chromosomes.

"These chromosomes are made up of strings of tiny particles which we call genes. And each of these genes has a potent and different controlling effect upon the development of the creature that grows from that germ-cell.

"Some of these genes control the creature's color, some control his size, some the shape of his limbs, and so on. Every characteristic of the creature is predetermined by the genes in its original germ-cell.

"But now and then the genes in a germ-cell will be greatly different from the genes normal to that species, and when that is so, the creature that grows from that germ-cell will be greatly different from the fellow-creatures of its species. He will be, in fact, of an entirely new species. That is the way in which new species come into existence on earth, the method of evolutionary change.

"Biologists have known this for some time and they have been searching for the cause of these sudden great changes, these mutations, as they are called. They have tried to find out what it is that affects the genes so radically.

"They have found experimentally that X-Rays and chemical rays of various kinds, when turned upon the genes of a germ-cell, will change them greatly. And the creature that grows from that germ-cell will thus be greatly changed, a mutant.

"Because of this, many biologists now believe that the radiation from the radioactive deposits inside earth, acting upon all the genes of every living thing on earth, are what cause the constant change of species, the procession of mutations, that has brought life up the evolutionary road to its present height.

"That is why I say that on any other world but earth, evolutionary progress might never have happened. For it may be that no other world has similar radioactive deposits within it to cause by gene-effect the mutations. On any other world, the first protoplasmic things that began life might have remained forever the same, down through endless generations.

"How thankful we ought to be that it was not so on earth! That mutation after mutation has followed, life ever changing and progressing into new and higher species, until the first crude protoplasm things have advanced through countless changing forms into the supreme achievement of man!"

WOODIN'S enthusiasm had carried him away as he talked but now he stopped, laughing a little as he relit his pipe.

"Sorry that I lectured you like a college freshman, Ross. But that's my chief subject of thought, my *idée fixe*, that wonderful upward climb of life through the ages."

Ross was staring thoughtfully into the fire. "It does seem wonderful the way you tell it. One species changing into another, going higher all the time —"

Gray stood up by the fire and stretched. "Well, you two can wonder over it but this crass materialist is going to emulate his remote invertebrate ancestors and return to a prostrate position. In other words, I'm going to bed."

He looked at Ross, a doubtful grin on his blond young face, and said, "No hard feelings now?"

"Forget it," the aviator grinned back. "The paddling *was* hard today and you fellows did look *mighty* skeptical."

"But you'll see! Tomorrow we'll be at the forks of the Little Whale and then I'll bet we won't scout an hour before we run across those jelly-creatures."

"I hope so," said Woodin yawningly. "Then we'll see just how good your eyesight is from a mile up, and whether you've yanked two respectable scientists up here for nothing."

Later as he lay in his blankets in the little tent, listening to Gray and Ross snore and looking sleepily out at the glowing fire embers, Woodin wondered again about that.

What had Ross actually seen in that fleeting glimpse from his speeding plane? Something queer, Woodin was sure of that, so sure that he'd come on this hard trip to find it. But what exactly?

Not protoplasmic things such as he described. That couldn't be, of course. Or could it? If things like that had existed once, why couldn't they — couldn't they —

Woodin didn't know he'd been sleeping until he was wakened by Gray's cry. It wasn't a nice cry, it was the hoarse yell of someone suddenly assaulted by bone-freezing terror.

He opened his eyes at that cry to see the Incredible looming against the stars in the open door of the tent. A dark, amorphous mass humped there in the opening, glistening all over in the starlight, and gliding into the tent. Behind it were others like it.

Things happened very quickly then. They seemed to Woodin to happen not consecutively but in a succession of swift, clicking scenes like the successive pictures of a motion picture film.

Gray's pistol roared red flame at the first viscous monster entering the tent, and the momentary flash showed the looming, glistening bulk of the thing, and Gray's panic-frozen face, and Ross clawing in his blankets for his pistol.

THEN the scene was over and instantly there was another one, Gray and Ross both stiffening suddenly as though petrified, both falling heavily over. Woodin knew they were both dead now, but didn't know how he knew it. The glistening monsters were coming on into the tent.

He ripped up the wall of the tent and plunged out into the cold starlight of the clearing. He ran three steps; he didn't know in what direction, and then he stopped. He didn't know why he stopped dead, but he did.

He stood there, his brain desperately urging his limbs to fly, but his limbs would not obey. He couldn't even turn, could not move a muscle of his body. He stood, his face toward the starlit gleam of the river, stricken by a strange and utter paralysis.

Woodin heard rustling, gliding movements in the tent behind him. Now from behind, there came into the line of his vision several of the glistening things. They were gathering around him, a dozen of them it seemed. He now could see them quite clearly.

They weren't nightmares, no. They were real, poised here around him, humped, amorphous masses of viscous, translucent jelly. Each was about four feet tall and three in diameter, though their shapes kept constantly changing slightly, making dimensions hard to guess.

At the center of each translucent mass was a dark, disk-like blob or nucleus. There was nothing else to the creatures, no limbs or sense-organs. He saw that they could protrude pseudopods, though, for two, who held the bodies of Gray and Ross in such tentacles, were now bringing them out and laying them down beside Woodin.

Woodin, still quite unable to move a muscle, could see the frozen, twisted faces of the two men, and could see the pistols still gripped in their dead hands. And then as he looked on Ross' face he remembered.

The things the aviator had seen, from his plane, the jelly-creatures they had come north to search for, they were the monsters around him! But how had they killed Ross and Gray, how were they holding him petrified like this, who were they?

"We will permit you to move but you must not try to escape."

Woodin's dazed brain numbed further with wonder. Who had said those words to him? He had heard nothing, yet he had *thought* he heard.

"We will let you move but you must not attempt to escape or harm us."

He *did* hear those words in his mind, even though his ears heard no sound. And now his brain heard more.

"We are speaking to you by transference of thought impulses. Have you sufficient mentality to understand us?"

Mind? Minds in these things? Woodin was shaken by the thought as he stared at the glistening monsters.

His thought apparently had reached them. "Of course we have minds," came the thought answer into his brain. "We are going to let you move, now, but do not try to flee."

"I — I won't try," Woodin told himself mentally.

At once the paralysis that held him abruptly lifted. He stood there in the circle of the glistening monsters, his hands and body trembling violently.

There were ten of them, he saw now. Ten monstrous, humped masses of shining, translucent jelly, gathered around him like cowed and faceless genii come from some haunt of the unknown. One stood closer to him than the others, apparently spokesman and leader.

Woodin looked slowly around their circle, then down at his two dead companions. In the midst of the unfamiliar terrors that froze his soul, he felt a sudden aching pity as he looked down at them.

Another strong thought came into Woodin's mind from the creature closest him. "We did not wish to kill them, we came here simply to capture and communicate with the three of you.

"But when we sensed that they were trying to kill us, we slew quickly. You, who did not try to kill us but fled, we harmed not."

"What — what do you want with us, with me?" Woodin asked through dry lips.

There was no mental answer this time. The things stood unmoving, a silent ring of brooding, unearthly figures.

Woodin felt his mind snapping under the strain of the silence and he asked the question again, screamed it.

This time the mental answer came. "I did not answer, because I was probing your mentality to ascertain whether you are of sufficient intelligence to comprehend our ideas.

"While your mind seems of an exceptionally low order, it seems possible that it can appreciate enough of what we wish to convey to understand us.

"Before beginning, however, I warn you again that it is quite impossible for you to escape or to harm any of us and that attempts to do so will result disastrously for you. It is apparent you know nothing of mental energy, so I will inform you that your two fellow-creatures were killed by the sheer power of our wills, and that your muscles were held unresponsive to your brain's commands by the same power. By our mental energy we could

completely annihilate your body, if we chose.

THERE was a pause, and in that little space of silence Woodin's dazed brain clutched desperately for sanity, for steadiness.

Then came again that mental voice that seemed so like a real voice speaking in his brain.

"We are children of a galaxy whose name, as nearly as it can be approximated in your tongue, is Arctar. The galaxy of Arctar lies so many million light-years from this galaxy that it is far around the curve of the sphere of the three-dimensional cosmos.

"We came to dominance in that galaxy long ages ago. For we were creatures who could utilize our mental energy for transport, for physical power, for producing almost any effect we required. Because of this we rapidly conquered and colonized that galaxy, travelling from sun to sun without need of any vehicle.

"Having brought all the matter of the galaxy Arctar under our control, we looked out upon the realms beyond. There are approximately a thousand million galaxies in the three-dimensional cosmos, and it seemed fitting to us that all the matter in the cosmos should in time be brought under our control.

"Our first step was to proliferate our numbers so as to multiply our number to that required for the great task of colonization of the cosmos. This was not difficult since, of course, reproduction with us is a matter of mere fission. When the requisite number of us were ready, they were divided into four forces.

"Then the whole sphere of the three-dimensional cosmos was quartered out among those four forces. Each was to colonize its division of the cosmos and so in their tremendous hosts they set out from Arctar, in four different directions.

"A part of one of these forces came to this galaxy of yours eons ago and spread out deliberately to colonize all its habitable worlds. All this took great lengths of time, of course, but our lives are of length vastly exceeding yours, and we comprehend that racial achievement is everything and individual achievement is nothing. In the colonization of this galaxy, a force of several million Arctarians came to this particular sun and, finding but this one planet of its nine nearer worlds habitable, settled here.

"Now it has been the rule that the colonists of all these worlds throughout the cosmos have kept in communication with the original home of our race, the galaxy Arctar. In that way, our people, who now hold the whole cosmos, are able to concentrate at

one point all their knowledge and power, and from that point go forth commands that shape great projects for the cosmos.

"But from this world no communications have ever been received since shortly after the force of colonizing Arctarians came here. When this was first noted the matter was deferred, it being thought that within a few more million years report would surely be made from this world, too. But still no word came, until after more than a thousand million years of this silence the directing council at Arctar ordered an expedition sent to this world to ascertain the reason for such silence on the part of its colonists.

"We ten form that expedition and we started from one of the worlds of the sun you call Sirius, a short distance from your own sun, where we too are colonists. We were ordered to come with full speed to this world and ascertain why its colonists had made no report. So, wafting ourselves by mental energy through the void, we crossed the span from sun to sun and a few days ago arrived on your world.

"Imagine our perplexity when we floated down here on your world! Instead of a world peopled in every square mile by Arctarians like ourselves, descended from the original colonists, a world completely under their mental control, we find a planet that is largely a wilderness of weird forms of life!

"We remained at this spot where we had landed and for some time sent our vision forth and scanned this whole globe mentally. And our perplexity increased for never had we seen such grotesque and degraded forms of life as presented themselves to us. And not one Arctarian was to be seen on this whole planet.

"This has sorely perplexed us, for what could have done away with the Arctarians who colonized this world? Our mighty colonists and their descendants surely could never have been overcome and destroyed by the pitifully weak mentalities that now inhabit this globe. Yet where, then, are they?

"That is why we sought to seize you and your companions. Low as we knew your mentalities must be, it seemed that surely even such as you would know what had become of our colonists who once inhabited this world."

The thought-stream paused a moment, then raced into Woodin's mind with a clear question.

"Have you not some knowledge of what became of our colonists? Some clue as to their strange disappearance?"

The numbed biologist found himself shaking his head slowly. "I never — I never heard before of such creatures as you, such minds. They never existed on earth that we know of, and we now know almost all of the history of earth."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the thought of the Arctarian leader. "Surely you must have some knowledge of our mighty people if you know all the history of this planet."

From another Arctarian's mind came a thought, directed at the leader but impinging indirectly on Woodin's brain.

"Why not examine the past of the planet through this creature's brain and see what we can for ourselves?"

"An excellent idea!" exclaimed the leader. "His mentality will be easy enough to probe."

"What are you going to do?" cried Woodin shrilly, panic edging his voice.

The answering thoughts were calming, reassuring. "Nothing that will harm you in the least. We are simply going to probe into your racial past by unlocking the inherited memories of your brain.

"In the unused cells of your brain lie impressed inherited racial memories that go back to your remotest ancestors. By our mental power of command we shall make those buried memories temporarily dominant and vivid in your mind.

"You will experience the same sensations, see the same scenes, that your remote ancestors of millions of years ago saw. And we, here around you, can read your mind as we now do, and so see what you are seeing, looking into the past of this planet.

"There is no danger. Physically you will remain standing here but mentally you will leap back across the ages. We shall first push your mind back to a time approximating that when our colonists came to this world, to see what happened to them"

NO SOONER had this thought impinged on Woodin's mind that the starlit scene around him, the humped masses of the Arctarians, suddenly vanished and his consciousness seemed whirling through gray mist.

He knew that physically he was not moving, yet mentally he had a sense of terrific velocity of motion. It was as though his mind was whirling across unthinkable gulfs, his brain expanding.

Then abruptly the gray mists cleared. A strange new scene took hazy form inside Woodin's mind.

It was a scene that he sensed, not saw. By other senses than sight did it present itself to his mind, yet it was none the less real and vivid.

He looked with those strange senses upon a strange earth, a world of gray seas and harsh continents of rock without any speck of life upon them. The skies were heavily clouded and rain fell continually.

Down upon that world Woodin felt himself dropping with a host of weird companions. They were each an amorphous, glistening, single-celled mass, with a dark nucleus at its center. They were Arctarians and Woodin knew that *he* was an Arctarian, and that he had come with the others a long way through space toward this world.

They landed in hosts upon the harsh and lifeless planet. They exerted their mentalities and by sheer telekinetic force of mental energy they altered the material world to suit them. They reared great structures and cities, cities that were not of matter but of *thought*. Weird cities built of crystallized mental energy.

Woodin could not comprehend a millionth of the activities he sensed going on in those alien Arctarian cities of thought. He realized a vast ordered mass of inquiry, investigation, experiment and communication, but all beyond his present human mind in motives and achievement. Abruptly all dissolved in gray mists again.

The mists cleared almost at once and now Woodin looked on another scene. It was later in time, this one. And now Woodin saw that time had worked strange changes upon the hosts of Arctarians, of which he still was one.



They had changed from unicellular to multicellular beings. And they were no longer all the same. Some were sessile, fixed in one spot, others mobile. Some betrayed a tendency toward the water, others toward the land. Something had changed the bodily form on the Arctarians as generations passed, branching them out in different lines.

This strange degeneration of their bodies had been accompanied by a kindred degeneration of their minds. Woodin sensed that. In the thought-cities the ordered process of search for knowledge and power had become confused, chaotic. And the thought-cities themselves were vanishing, the Arctarians having no longer sufficient mental energy to maintain them.

The Arctarians were trying to ascertain what was causing this strange bodily and mental degeneration in them. They thought it was something that was affecting the genes of their bodies, but what it was they could not guess. On no other world had they ever degenerated so!

That scene passed rapidly into another much later. Woodin now *saw* the scene, for by then the ancestor, whose mind he looked through, had developed eyes. And he saw that the degeneration had now gone far, the Arctarians' multicellular bodies more and more stricken by the diseases of complexity and diversification.

THE LAST of the thought-cities now were gone. The once mighty Arctarians had become hideous, complex organisms degenerating ever further, some of them creeping and swimming in the waters, others fixed upon the land.

They still had left some of the great original mentality of their ancestors. These monstrously-degenerated creatures of land and sea, living in what Woodin's mind recognized as the late Paleozoic age, still made frantic and futile attempts to halt the terrible progress of their degradation.

Woodin's mind flashed into a scene later still, in the Mesozoic. Now the spreading degeneration had made of the descendants of the colonists a still more horrible group of races. Great webbed and scaled and taloned creatures they were now, reptiles living in land and water.

Even these incredibly-changed creatures possessed a faint remnant of their ancestor's mental power. They made vain attempts to communicate with Arctarians far on other worlds of distant suns, to apprise them of their plight. But their minds were now too weak.

There followed a scene in the Cenozoic. The reptiles had

become mammals, the downward progress of the Arctarians had gone farther. Now only the merest shreds of the original mentality remained in these degraded descendants.

And now this pitiful posterity had produced a species even more foolish and lacking in mental power than any before, ground-apes that roamed the cold plains in chattering, quarreling packs. The last shreds of Arctarian inheritance, the ancient instincts toward dignity and cleanliness and forbearance, had faded out of these creatures.

And then a last picture filled Woodin's brain. It was the world of the present day, the world he had seen through his own eyes. But now he saw and understood it as he never had before, a world in which degeneration had gone to the utmost limit.

The apes had become even weaker bipedal creatures, who had lost almost every atom of inheritance of the old Arctarian mind. These creatures had lost, too, many of the senses which had been retained even by the apes before them.

And these creatures, these humans, were now degenerating with increasing rapidity. Where at first they had killed like their animal forebears only for food, they had learned to kill wantonly. And had learned to kill each other in groups, in tribes, in nations and hemispheres. In the madness of their degeneracy they slaughtered each other until earth ran with their blood.

They were more cruel even than the apes who had preceded them, cruel with the utter cruelty of the mad. And in their progressive insanity they came to starve in the midst of plenty, to slay each other in their own cities, to cower beneath the lash of superstitious fears as no creatures had before them.

They were the last terrible descendants, the last degenerated product, of the ancient Arctarian colonists who once had been kings of intellect. Now the other animals were almost gone. These, the last hideous freaks, would soon wind up the terrible story entirely by annihilating each other in their madness.

WOODIN came suddenly to consciousness. He was standing in the starlight in the center of the riverside clearing. And around him still were poised the ten amorphous Arctarians, a silent ring.

Dazed, reeling from the tremendous and awful vision that has passed through his mind with incredible vividness, he turned slowly from one to the other of the Arctarians. Their thoughts impinged on his brain, strong, somber, shaken by terrible horror and loathing.

The sick thought of the Arctarian leader beat into Woodin's mind.

"So *that* is what became of our Arctarian colonists who came to this world! They degenerated, changed into lower and lower forms of life, until these pitiful insane things, who now swarm on this world, are their last descendants.

"This world is a world of deadly horror! A world that somehow damages the genes of our race's bodies and changes them bodily and mentally, making them degenerate further each generation. Before us we see the awful result."

The shaken thought of another Arctarian asked, "But what can we do now?"

"There is nothing we can do," uttered their leader solemnly. "This degeneration, this awful change, has gone too far for us ever to reverse it now.

"Our intelligent brothers became on this poisoned world things of horror and we cannot now turn back the clock and restore them from the degraded things their descendants are."

Woodin found his voice and cried out thinly, shrilly.

"It isn't true!" he cried. "It's all a lie, what I saw! We humans aren't the product of downward devolution, we're the product of ages of upward evolution! We must be, I tell you! Why, we wouldn't want to live, I wouldn't want to live, if that other tale was true. It can't be true!"

The thought of the Arctarian leader, directed at the other amorphous shapes, reached his raving mind.

It was tinged with pity, yet strong with a superhuman loathing.

"Come, my brothers," the Arctarian was saying to his fellows. "There is nothing we can do here on this soul-sickening world. Let us go, before we too are poisoned and changed. And we will send warning to Arctar that this world is a poisoned world, a world of degeneration, so that never again may any of our race come here and go down the awful road that those others went down.

"Come! We return to our own sun."

The Arctarian leader's humped shape flattened, assumed a disk-like form, then rose smoothly upward into the air.

The others too changed and followed, in a group, and a stupefied Woodin stared up at them, glistening dots lifting rapidly into the starlight.

He staggered forward a few steps, shaking his fist furiously, insanely up at the shining, receding dots.

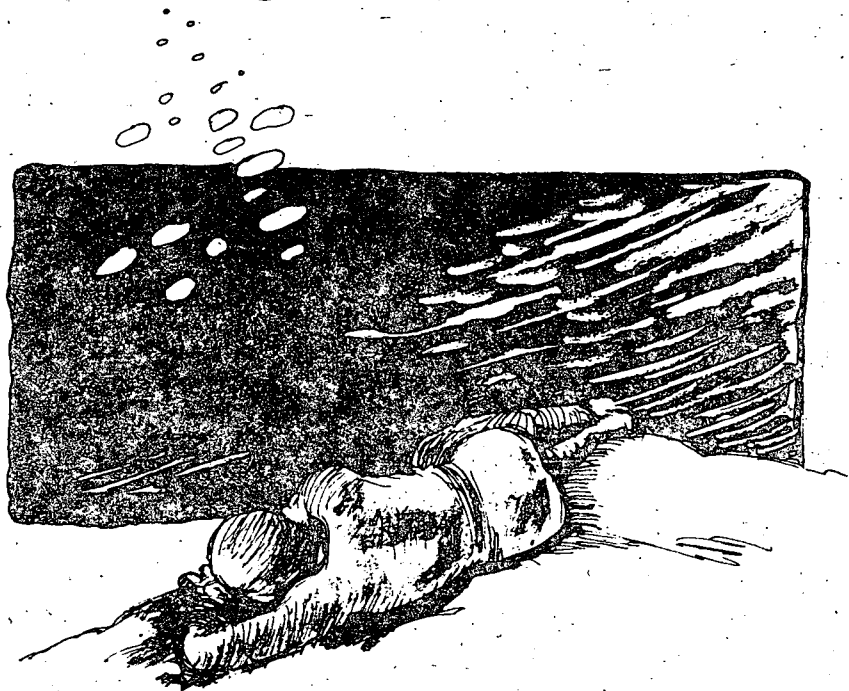
"Come back, damn you!" he screamed. "Come back and tell me it's a lie!"

"It must be a lie — it must —"

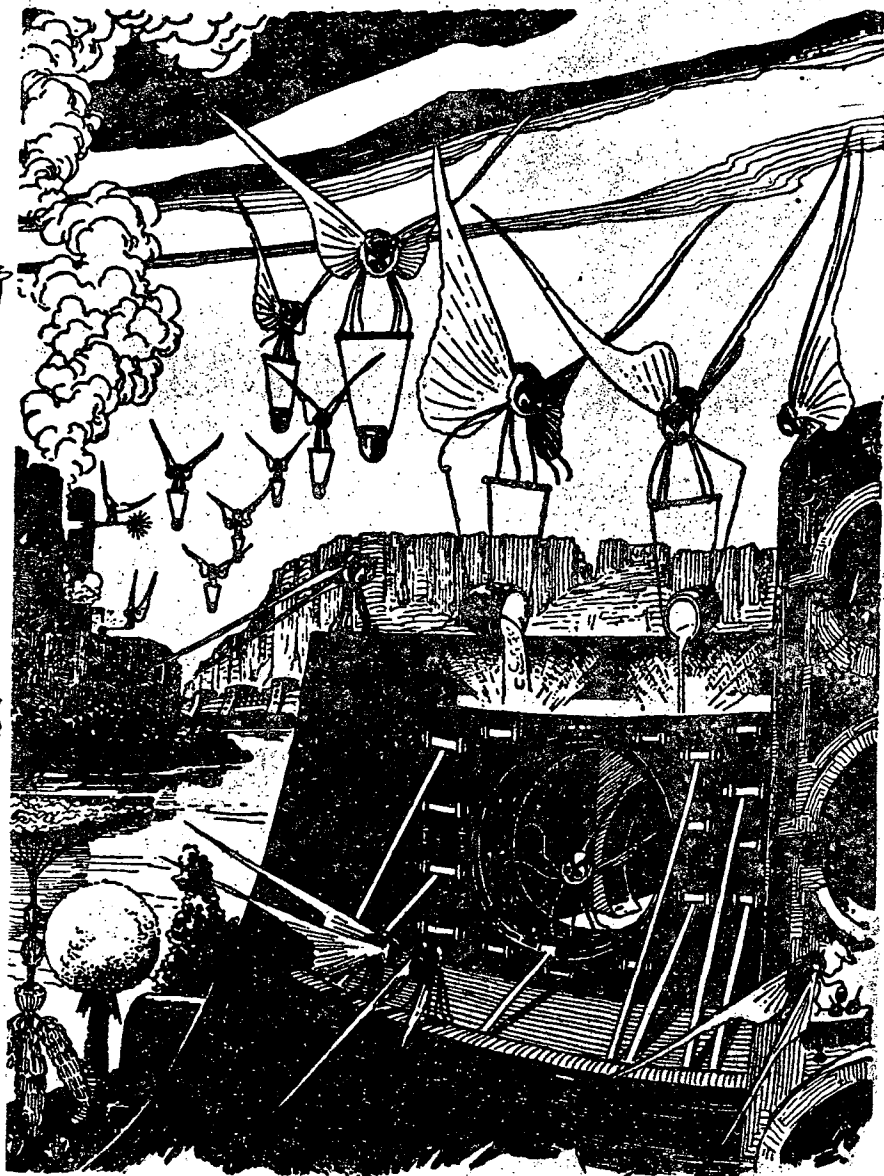
There was no sign of the vanished Arctarians now in the starlit sky. The darkness was brooding and intense around Woodin.

He screamed up again into the night but only a whispering echo answered. Wild-eyed, staggering, soul-smitten, his gaze fell on the pistol in Ross' hand. He seized it with a hoarse cry.

The stillness of the forest was broken suddenly by a sharp crack, that reverberated a moment and then died rapidly away. Then all was silent again save for the chuckling whisper of the river hurrying on. ●

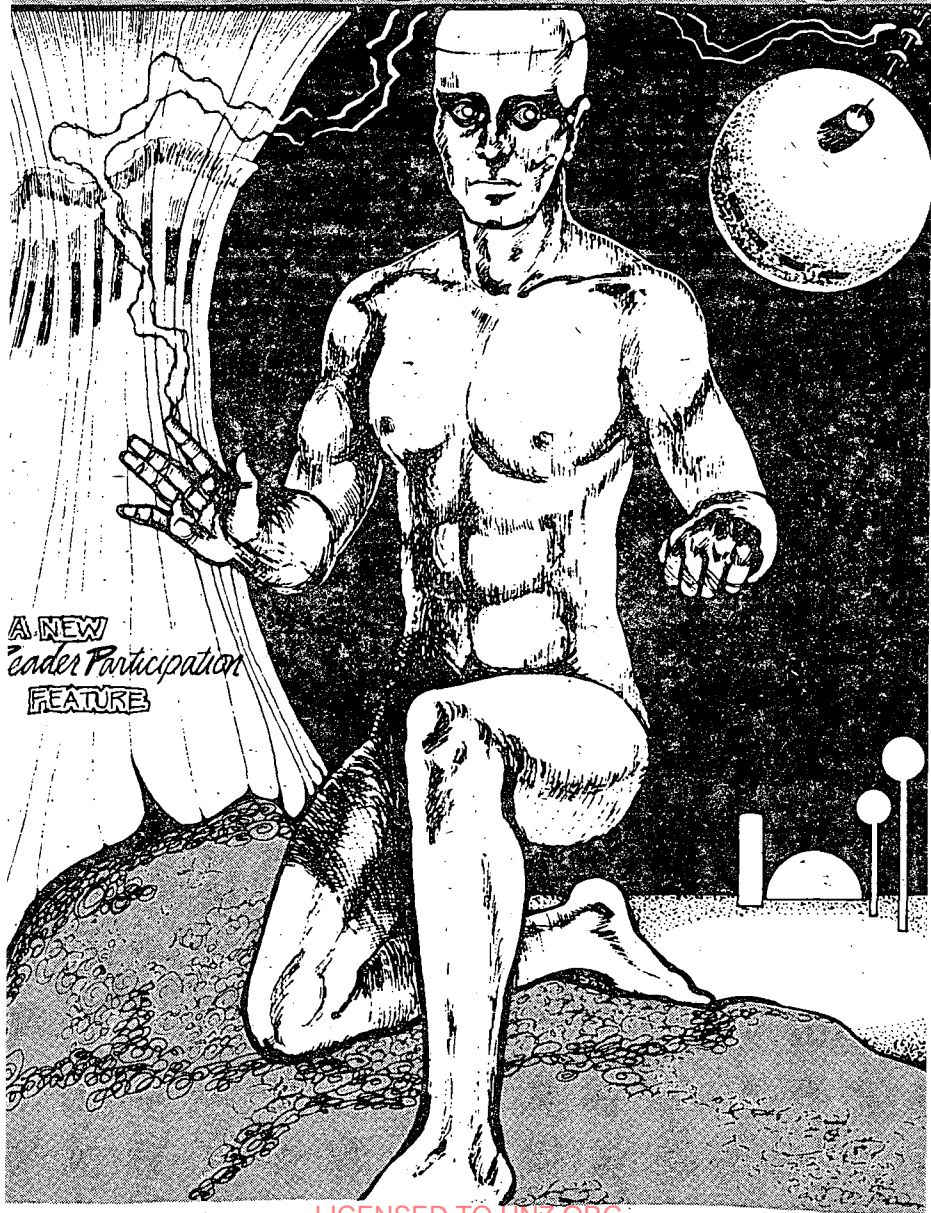


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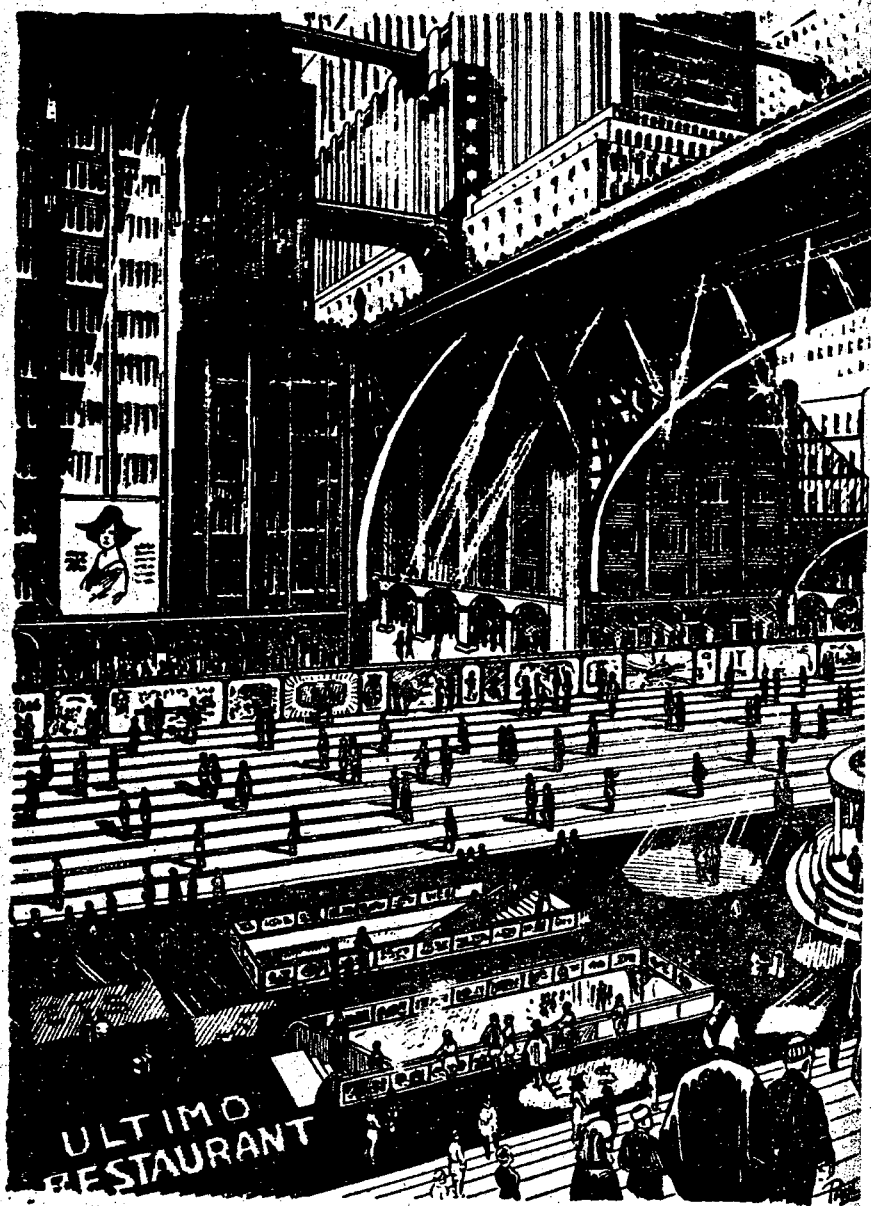




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TORO

y Mack Reynolds

You've heard of people who live their lives through someone else, instead of creating a world of their own? Well, here's a chilling tale of a being, an alien, who arrives abruptly on earth and must learn our ways through the various life forms he uses as his "host." Wwiern is what you call a "symbiont." Of course, a true symbiotic relationship is one that is mutually beneficial to both host and parasite, and our friend Wwiern stretches the point just a bit, don't you think?

WWIERN was having difficulty with his Udd. It was all he could do to keep life within it and against all of his natural tendencies to do so. Prolonging the existence of a living creature when it was in extreme pain was against every civilized instinct within him but Wwiern was in no position to allow the Udd relief and escape from life's ills for at least another hour. An hour, he told himself apologetically, wasn't too much to ask of an Udd who had lived his life in comfort and security under the guidance of Wwiern's superior intellect.

The green planet was coming up rapidly, more so than the small space craft's pilot would have preferred. It took considerable concentration on Wwiern's part to activate his host's tenacles so that they reached out and dropped the telescopic wing lever.

He would be airborne now, in moments.

Another tenacle wearily touched refrigeration unit controls.

Wwiern, with exhausting exertion, brought spark to the Udd's eyes to the point where he could concentrate again on the volume before him. He checked quickly the material available on the planet beneath. Little was known he realized with the equivalent of a groan. The oxygen content, unimportant to him but definitely so to his Udd; the gravity, heavy but not impossible; the vegetation, it should support life as he knew it, although his own nourishment was assimilated from the body of the host he occupied and the problem was once removed from him.

Information on animal life was practically non-existent. Intelligent life? The last time the Galactic League had checked the planet there had been signs of development of a two-legged mammal somewhat similar to the Kroos of Diocletian Two. It had reached the point of using sharpened stones for weapons and tools. There seemed possibilities that such might be utilized as a host, although he had no idea of its size and whether or not it would fit the confines of his tiny space craft.

But that would have to wait.

The atmosphere was beginning to cushion him. The dulling eyes of the Udd checked dials, meters, flickering warning lights. Wwiern forced a tenacle to activate the refrigeration units still more, friction was heating the ship dangerously.

It became a question now of setting down before all signs of life were gone from the Udd. The one situation aggravated the other. Increased deceleration, of little effect on Wwiern, in view of the almost liquid nature of his physical body, accelerated the dying process of the Udd. But there was nothing for it.

At the last split second before touching down, Wwiern spotted

animal life below in a large field. With every faculty available to him, with every iota of psychic strength at his control, he forced the Udd to touch here, there, to press this, release that. They slid into a landing, an all but perfect landing, and the Udd was dead.

For a long moment Wwiern, the symbiont, held inactivity in the memory of the long years of faithful service the Udd had given him and he had returned. A symbiotic relationship must not be one of master and slave, and on the planet of his birth most certainly was not.

But there was danger in remaining in the Udd following its death. He began, then, to ease his way from its brain and out of its body using the various nasal passages in the creature's abdominal region.

Once free, and the process took several minutes, he began to take stock of his situation. His physical powers, without his symbiotic host, were negligible but there were two or three controls built into his craft for just such emergencies. He was able to activate the scanner and to size up the grove in which his craft had landed. To one side were various tall woody plants, all about him, vegetation much shorter. And now he could make out one of the animal life forms which had attracted him. It was a gigantic, four-legged beast, obviously herbivorous. It was a potential host, although not ideal.

Wwiern was at a loss on how to proceed. The yellow sun above, he knew, would destroy him in moments were he to expose himself to it without the protesting bulk of a host and he had no idea of how to cross the distance from ship to beast.

The problem was solved by the animal itself. The gigantic black creature, possibly half again as large as the space craft, had been pawing the ground, snorting, obviously upset by the presence of the metallic strangeness which had dropped from the skies. Now suddenly it exploded into movement and thundered down upon the intruder.

Wwiern felt the impact as a blow, felt his craft rupture, was thrown back and into a corner of the control room. He could feel, although his senses were such as usually to be focused through those of another, the impact of additional charges, of continued blows and the noises of the angry colossus.

But at least the attack served to solve the problem immediately before him. Satisfied, at last, that the enemy was *hors de combat*, the black monster stood above the wreckage, his head lowered belligerently, and within a few inches of the symbiont.

Wwiern gathered his forces, projecting quieting telepathic commands which he could only hope might be somewhat effective on this new life form, and then touched exploringly the creature's snout. The hypnosis was more effective than he had even hoped and he was able to flow into the beast's body with little more effort than would have been necessary with the Udd.

He explored rapidly the animal's structure, settling finally in the area where spine and skull met, sending tendrils out to control senses and muscles.

As he had decided from the first view, the intelligence quotient of his new host was negligible. Within a few minutes he had established dominance of the beast's functions and began practicing locomotion and sensory influence.

The space craft, he decided, was a complete loss. The very best that he could hope for would be to find a more suitable host, one possessing limbs capable of delicate work, and build signal equipment that could reach out into space and request rescue.

There was equipment in the space craft, how badly damaged he didn't know, that he would undoubtedly need for such a signalling device. He activated his host and with its horns pushed the battered ship to the shade of the tall woody vegetation and then did his best to disguise it with bushes, leaves and fallen branches. The task took time in view of the clumsiness of his animal, but it might be of importance.

His immediate job, aside from keeping his host fed and watered, was to find an animal form with hands such as were possessed by the Kroons of Diocletian Two, or with tentacles such as those of the Udd. That two-legged life form mentioned in the manual—if only it had survived.

Its survival was brought home to him in brief order.

He could hear a galloping of hoofs, some animal shouting, and over the hill swept two beasts which at first he took to be as strange as any the galaxy offered. It took moments for him to control the terror within his host and prevent him from dashing off.

A noose flashed out from one of the two newcomers and settled over his host's head and was quickly drawn. Another flicked out from the second of the two creatures and his black beast was held tight. And it was not until then that Wwiern understood that the newcomers were not indeed two animals, but four. Here then was a situation somewhat similar to his own symbiotic existence.

The controlling life form slipped from the back of its four-legged beast of burden and approached along the rope it had earlier thrown.

Still fighting the belligerent fear of the animal in his power, Wwiern had little time to more than realize that this two-legged creature must be the intelligent life form the Galactic League explorers had mentioned. It had evidently developed itself considerably,

Additional proof of that was forthcoming in moments when a vehicle, four wheeled and stinking of an internal combustion engine, surmounted the hill in its turn and disgorged another trio of the two-legged intelligent life forms.

It took possibly five minutes for Wwiern and his host to be induced and forced into the back compartment of the vehicle, a task helped considerably when Wwiern discovered what the newcomers were about. It disrupted his plans not at all to be thus brought in more easy contact with the life form which was obviously most suited for him in a symbiotic relationship.

There was going to have to be some means of communication established, but that could wait. It was quite possible for him to occupy his position in a host without its knowledge and from that vantage point assimilate its means of communication and even more remote customs—although that would take time.

The ride from grove to the settlement of the two-legs was made the easier for his four-legged beast by Wwiern's relaxing presence. He did his best to sooth its outraged instincts, to loosen its muscles the better to absorb the bouncing of the poorly defined road.

The arrival at their destination was confusing even to Wwiern; there was too much to see, too much to assimilate. He had confused pictures of a large, two-legs settlement, of tall buildings, and obvious indications of a rather advanced culture. How advanced, of course, he had no way of knowing until there would be opportunity for more extensive observation.

Thus far he'd had no opportunity to come close enough to one of the two-legs to change hosts. He wondered if the animals of this world, intelligent and otherwise, slept, as did the Udd. If so, transfer would be simple.

He found himself, in the four-legged beast, housed in a small, stall-like compartment, food, in the way of dried vegetation, before them, and water to one side. To the best of his ability he calmed the animal whose brain he occupied and urged it to consume the nourishment offered.

It occurred to him suddenly that the two-legs might be carnivorous and, if so, that possibly his host was slated for death and to

make food for the others.

The idea revolted him but he was able to understand it. Intelligent life developed on the various planets throughout the Galactic League from a variety of backgrounds. Carnivora had on more than one occasion reached true civilization, although, of course, long before its achieving they had found substitutes for their meat craving. Possibly the two-legs of this planet were in the transition period, not having as yet been able to emancipate themselves from depending upon the flesh of their fellow life forms.

Still without the opportunity to switch hosts, Wwiern spent a prolonged period in the stall, unable to measure its extent although there were periods of dark and light. He directed the animal's assimilation of food and drink and took the opportunity to further study the workings of its system. It was, he decided, a fairly young animal although fully adult and in excellent physical condition. He had never before occupied a host so muscularly perfect and decided that it must be at the prime of its life expectancy.

Eventually doors were opened, a passage exposed.

His four-legged beast without need to be prompted by Wwiern trotted down the passage toward the light and freedom that indicated itself at passage end.

Suddenly, just as they emerged into the light, searing pain flooded out from the beast's shoulder. The unexpectedness of it blinded Wwiern, terrified his host, who broke into a hysterical gallop, kicking his legs up behind him.

It took a shocked moment for the symbiont to realize that someone, or something, had embedded a short metal-tipped dart into his host's shoulder. He tried to regain the control he had lost when the pain had it, but it took long moments to achieve mastery once more.

Before them a two-legs, one of the intelligent life forms, richly clothed in startling colors, was waving a large red cape. Still swept with pain and anger, the four-legged host Wwiern dominated sped after the darting two-leg, almost catching him before Wwiern brought it back under control.

He had narrowly averted, Wwiern believed, a horrible tragedy. Undoubtedly, the two-legs had not known of the accident which had hurt and terrified the unintelligent beast. In trying to guide it, two-legs had been unaware that the beast might well have injured him.

In control again, Wwiern trotted his host back to the center of the area in which he found himself and took stock of the new situation.

He seemed to be centered in a large arena, hemmed in by wooden walls. To his surprise, he found himself confronting literally thousands of this planet's intelligent life forms. Thousands. They sat in rows, tier upon tier of them, beyond the wooden barrier which surrounded the arena, and were shouting and calling — obviously some form of communication.

Most were packed tightly in their seats but centering was one box that stood out in prominence and contained but a few of the spectators. One, in particular seemed the focus of their attention. Crowned with blonde hair, and obviously held in esteem — Wwiern knew instinctively she was a female — she seemed to hold distinction. Wwiern had no time to consider this further.

Another of the colorfully clad two-legs had darted out, cape in hand, and was waving it toward Wwiern's host and calling, *Toro, Huh, Toro!*

Wwiern failed to understand and, in his puzzlement, allowed the animal again to escape from his domination. It burst suddenly into speed and dashed for the two-legs who side-stepped neatly, to Wwiern's relief. The beast swirled again to try at the two-legs but now Wwiern had him in hand. He trotted his host back to the arena center, considered again the various possibilities of what was developing.

Obviously, this was not what he had first thought, a simple attempt to slaughter the animal for the sake of food. One could almost believe a festival of some sort to be proceeding. The colorful clothing of the two or three men in the ring contrasted sharply with the drabness of that worn by the others.

He held tight control of his host, refusing to let it charge again although the irritating capes continued to wave and the two-legs came provocatively nearer.

A blast of what Wwiern decided must be a crude sort of musical instrument split the air and the capes retired. From a far door appeared two two-legs mounted upon four-legged ones, similar to the arrangement under which Wwiern's host had been captured in the grove. They bore long staves tipped by metal and seemed to wear metal covering on their legs.

They approached carefully and a hush descended over the multitude in the stands.

It occurred to Wwiern at this point that possibly the host in

which he had taken refuge was a criminal and had come to this to be executed. But surely in such a case there would hardly be the thousands of spectators. His own race resorted sometimes, in extreme situation, to execution but certainly it was in sorrow it was performed, not in the trappings of festival.

He was shocked from his musings by his beast's sudden lunge toward one of the newcomers. He tried to assume immediate control but not before the two-leg, mounted on his steed, had leaned heavily on his metal tipped staff inserting it deeply into the muscle of Wwiern's host, into the powerful muscle of the back.

Once again agonizing pain swept over Wweirn and he felt again and again the stabbing probing of the weapon. Of a sudden there were swirling capes and then more probes and the beast in which Wwiern resided was plunging and rearing in an attempt to get to his tormentors.

It was long moments before Wwiern found himself again in domination of the animal and now he realized the position in which he stood and that of his beast.

The two-legs in the stands were screaming their excitement and their bloodlust, the blonde-headed one, the guest of the afternoon, was clapping her hands, her eyes sparkling in excitement.

He realized the position in which he and his host stood. They were being sacrificed to provide a spectacle to satisfy bloodlust and to thrill with their deaths.

For a thousand millennia the race of which Wwiern was a member had not killed in anger or in sport and seldom at all. In all his life, he himself had never killed or even remotely considered the harming of a fellow life form. This was new and beyond belief.

But deep within him the stirring of anger was there. Anger and the demand for self-defense, for as long as he occupied this host his instincts were all to protect it. He remembered now that it was with his aid the creature had been easily captured in the fields, he himself had pacified it when it had wished to escape from its two-legs hunters.

The musical instruments had blared again and the arena was now empty.

But only momentarily. Advancing toward them, two barbed sticks in one hand, was one of the colorfully dressed two-legs, arrogance and confidence in his tread.

And cruel death in his face.

The crowd screamed its pleasure.

Wwiern waited for developments. Waiting to see what came

next in this spectacle of pain and hate. He knew one thing. If possible, he was not going to allow his host to suffer further wounds.

The beast was growing restless, wishing to charge. It pawed the ground nervously.

Huh, Toro! the two-legs called disdainfully.

Wwiern waited for the two-legs to approach closer. Suddenly it began to run toward them in a quarter-circle, barbs extended.

The symbiont allowed his host to break into a run in return and two-legs and four approached a collision point. And now Wwiern could see the other's plan. He expected to place the darts and swirl away to retreat safely to the wooden wall which surrounded the ring.

For a moment the brightly clad two-legs was up on his toes, barbs held gracefully high, and then Wwiern had tossed the sharp horn of his beast to the left, embedding one deep into the other's abdominal cavity. Even as the horn sank to its full depth he could see the look of shocked amazement which preceeded pain in the face of his enemy.

There were shouts and calls from all directions and he tossed his host's head, throwing the antagonist to one side in the movement.

The animal's instincts over which he had to hold tight rein, cried to be allowed to pursue the fallen two-legs, to gore him again and again, to trample and toss, and almost Wwiern was able to lose himself in the primitive creature's bloodlust. Almost, but not quite. Wwiern held him firm. A clear head was needed now.

The others were coming, waving their capes and attempting to rescue their comrade. Wwiern charged.

Two he gored, ingoring the flapping capes on which they depended. One he knocked down and trampled.

Four writhing figures, three of them streaming blood, marked the sand of the arena when he trotted back to its center to resume his position.

The cries from the stands had, to his surprise, changed little. The bloodlust was still there. Shockingly, the fact that the blood spilt had been that of the two-legs rather than his host had not deterred them.

He realized then that the multitudes had come for that very purpose — to see their own race risked as well as to witness the death of a more lowly life form.

He had expected to allow the fallen wounded to be taken away

for treatment but now the full realization of the depravity of this life form brought him to bitter action again. A thousand millennia of civilization dropped away and he became truly a part of the beast he occupied.

He thundered forward, not knowing whether or not this was possible, whether his animal host, beautiful specimen though it was, was capable of the exertion he demanded of it. It was. The wooden barrier he cleared, landing behind it in a confusion of shouting, horrified spectators.

He charged desperately, tossing and goring, tramping indiscriminately. But this was not his goal, his overpowering rage encompassed the thousands above him. He sped about the enclosure searching for a method to ascend the wall into the stands.

Here! Here it was. A stand built for an observer who has stood with some lensed device in his hands, some type of photography, Wwiern decided. The stand was all he needed.

Front feet, a mighty stretching, punishing bound and his legs were over the stone balustrade above. He scrambled mightily, using muscles for a task never remotely contemplated by his host — and then was in the packed seats.

They faced him not a moment, the shouting, screaming, terrified multitudes. He plowed through them as they turned to run, tossed and gored, trampled and killed in his fury of contempt and revenge.

When he stopped, the fury was still within him but they were gone. Through small doors, sometimes over the wall, back into the arena, they had flowed to escape him.

He stood alone except for the dead and the wounded too badly hurt to escape.

At his feet lay stretched the blonde-haired one, the guest, he had decided, of the honored two-legs. A female of the species, undoubtedly a beauty among the race.

From the wall there was a loud report and he felt a stunning blow strike the side of his host. He glared up at the source of the sound. A two-legs stood at the wall's top, a smoking tube in hand. An advanced weapon throwing a projectile by chemical explosion, Wwiern realized. — his host's time was limited.

— He looked down again at the blonde-haired one. He had not gored nor trampled her. She was untouched but unconscious, evidently in a faint from terror. In view of the fact that she breathed still, he assumed she would recover in time.

The loud report came again, and the blow all but forced him to his knees.

Wwiern had little time. He extended the animal's snout to within inches of the fallen female. The blast came again and the animal sank to its knees in agony and even as it did, Wwiern began to leave its body. Slowly he oozed from his dying four-legged host and toward the two-legs. He knew that from the distance involved none of the other two-legs would observe. The process would take only moments.

And if they thought he had caused them damage in the four-legged host, wait until he was in control of this blonde, two-legs female. One way or the other he would show them what trouble really was! ©

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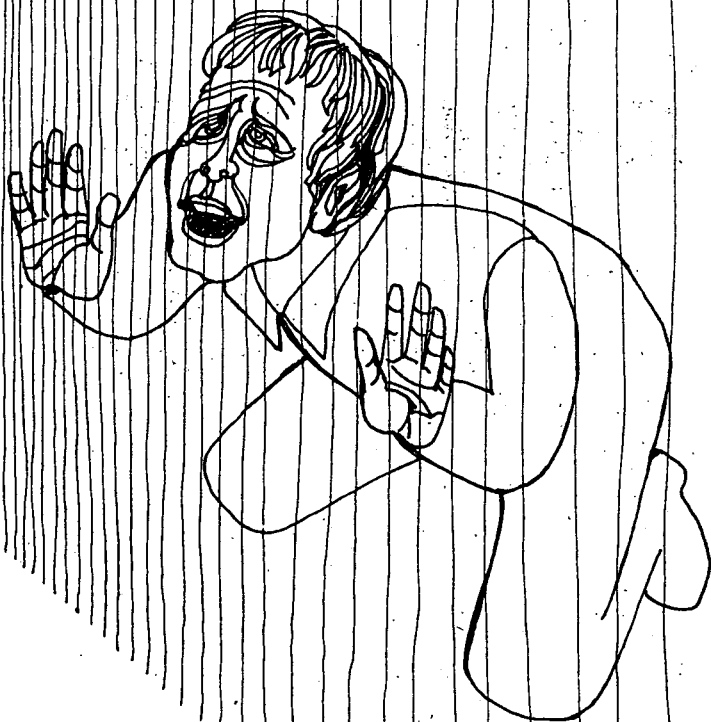




THE ETERNAL WALL

by Raymond Z. Gallun

Travelers in time often rush headlong into their adventures, unmindful of the possible array of terrible consequences. But, what of this hapless soul who unknowingly breeches a warp in time and finds himself in some remote era, far beyond his ability to comprehend or control? What would you do?



See you in half an hour, Betty,” said Ned Vince over the party telephone. “We’ll be out at the Silver Basket before ten-thirty ...”

Ned Vince was eager for the company of the girl he loved. That was why he was in a hurry to get to the neighboring town of Hurley, where she lived. His old car rattled and roared as he swung it recklessly around Pit Bend.

There was where Death tapped him on the shoulder. Another car leaped suddenly into view, its lights glaring blindingly past a high, upjutting mass of Jurassic rock at the turn of the road.

Dazzled, and befuddled by his own rash speed, Ned Vince had only swift young reflexes to rely on to avoid a fearful, telescoping collision. He flicked his wheel smoothly to the right; but the County Highway Commission hadn’t yet tarred the traffic-loosened gravel at the Bend.

Ned could scarcely have chosen a worse place to start sliding and spinning. His car hit the white-painted wooden rail sideways, crashed through, tumbled down a steep slope, struck a huge boulder, bounced up a little, and arced outward, falling as gracefully as a swan-diver toward the inky waters of the Pit, fifty feet beneath ...

Ned Vince was still dimly conscious when that black, quiet pool gysered around him in a mighty splash. He had only a dazing welt on his forehead, and a gag of terror in his throat.

Movement was slower now, as he began to sink, trapped inside his wrecked car. Nothing that he could imagine could mean doom more certainly than this. The Pit was a tremendously deep pocket in the ground, spring-fed. The edges of that almost bottomless pool were caked with a rim of white—for the water, on which dead birds so often floated, was surcharged with alkali. As that heavy, natronous liquid rushed up through the openings and cracks beneath his feet, Ned Vince knew that his friends and his family would never see his body again, lost beyond recovery in this abyss.

The car was deeply submerged. The light had blinked out on the dash-panel, leaving Ned in absolute darkness. A flood rushed in at the shattered window. He clawed at the door, trying to open it, but it was jammed in the crash-bent frame, and he couldn’t fight against the force of that incoming water. The welt, left by the blow he had received on his forehead, put a thickening mist over his brain, so that he could not think clearly. Presently, when he could no longer hold his breath, bitter liquid was sucked into his lungs.

His last thoughts were those of a drowning man. The machine-

shop he and his dad had had in Harwich. Betty Moore, with the smiling Irish eyes - like in the song. Betty and he had planned to go to the State University this Fall. They'd planned to be married sometime. ... Goodbye, Betty ...

The ripples that had ruffled the surface waters in the Pit, quieted again to glassy smoothness. The eternal stars shone calmly. The geologic Dakota hills, which might have seen the dinosaurs, still bulked along the highway. Time, the Brother of Death, and the Father of Change, seemed to wait ...

"Kaallee! Tik! ... Tik, tik, tik! ... Kaallee! ..."

The excited cry, which no human throat could quite have duplicated accurately, arose thinly from the depths of a powder-dry gulch, water-scarred from an inconceivable antiquity. The noonday Sun was red and huge. The air was tenuous, dehydrated, chill.

"Kaallee! ... Tik, tik, tik! ..."

At first there was only one voice uttering those weird, triumphant sounds. Then other vocal organs took up that trilling wail, and those short, sharp chuckles of eagerness. Other questioning, wondering notes mixed with the cadence. Lacking qualities identifiable as human, the disturbance was still like the babble of a group of workmen who have discovered something remarkable.

The desolate expanse around the gulch, was all but without motion. The icy breeze tore tiny puffs of dust from grotesque, angling drifts of soil, nearly waterless for eons. Patches of drab lichen grew here and there on the up-jutting rocks, but in the desert itself, no other life was visible. Even the hills had sagged away, flattened by incalculable ages of erosion.

At a mile distance, a crumbling heap of rubble arose. Once it had been a building. A gigantic, jagged mass of detritus slanted upward from its crest—red debris that had once been steel. A launching catapult for the last space ships built by the gods in exodus, perhaps it was—half a million years ago. Man was gone from the Earth. Glacial ages, war, decadence, disease, and a final scattering of those ultimate superhumans to newer worlds in other solar systems, had done that.

"Kaallee! ... Tik, tik, tik! ..." The sounds were not human. They were more like the chatter and wail of small desert animals.

But there was a seeming paradox here in the depths of that gulch, too. The glint of metal, sharp and burnished. The flat, streamlined bulk of a flying machine, shiny and new. The bell-like muzzle of a strange excavator-apparatus, which seemed to depend on a blast of atoms to clear away rock and soil. Thus the

gulch had been cleared of the accumulated rubbish of antiquity. Man, it seemed, had a successor, as ruler of the Earth.

Loy Chuk had flown his geological expedition out from the far lowlands to the east, out from the city of Kar-Rah. And he was very happy now—flushed with a vast and unlooked-for success.

He crouched there on his haunches, at the dry bottom of the Pit. The breeze ruffled his long, brown fur. He wasn't very different in appearance from his ancestors. A foot tall, perhaps, as he squatted there in that antique stance of his kind. His tail was short and furred, his undersides creamy. White whiskers spread around his inquisitive, pink-tipped snout.

But his cranium bulged up and forward between shrewd, beady eyes, betraying the slow heritage of time, of survival of the fittest, of evolution. He could think and dream and invent, and the civilization of his kind was already far beyond that of the ancient Twentieth Century.

Loy Chuk and his fellow workers were gathered, tense and gleeful, around the things their digging had exposed to the daylight. There was a gob of junk - scarcely more than an irregular formation of flaky rust. But imbedded in it was a huddled form, brown and hard as old wood. The dry mud that had encased it like an airtight coffin, had by now been chipped away by the tiny investigators; but soiled clothing still clung to it, after perhaps a million years. Metal had gone into decay - yes. But not this body. The answer to this was simple—alkali. A mineral saturation that had held time and change in stasis. A perfect preservative for organic tissue, aided probably during most of those passing eras by desert dryness. The Dakotas had turned arid very swiftly. This body was not a mere fossil. It was a mummy.

"Kaallee!" Man, that meant. Not the star-conquering demigods, but the ancestral stock that had built the first machines on Earth, and in the early Twenty-first Century, the first interplanetary rockets. No wonder Loy Chuk and his coworkers were happy in their paleontological enthusiasm! A strange accident, happening in a legendary antiquity, had aided them in their quest for knowledge.

At last Loy Chuk gave a soft, chirping signal. The chant of triumph ended, while instruments flicked in his tiny hands. The final instrument he used to test the mummy, looked like a miniature stereoscope, with complicated details. He held it over his eyes. On the tiny screen within, through the agency of focused X-rays, he saw magnified images of the internal organs of this ancient human corpse.

What his probing gaze revealed to him, made his pleasure even greater than before. In twittering, chattering sounds, he communicated his further knowledge to his henchmen. Though devoid of moisture, the mummy was perfectly preserved, even to its brain cells! Medical and biological sciences were far advanced among Loy Chuk's kind. Perhaps, by the application of principles long known to them, this long-dead body could be made to live again! It might move, speak, remember its past! What a marvelous subject for study it would make, back there in the museums of Kar-Rah!

"Tik, tik, tik! ..."

But Loy silenced this fresh, eager chattering with a command. Work was always more substantial than cheering.

With infinite care - small, sharp hand-tools were used, now—the mummy of Ned Vince was disengaged from the worthless rust of his primitive automobile. With infinite care it was crated in a metal case, and hauled into the flying machine.

Flashing flame, the latter arose, bearing the entire hundred members of the expedition. The craft shot eastward at bullet-like speed. The spreading continental plateau of North America seemed to crawl backward, beneath. A tremendous, sand desert, marked with low, washed-down mountains, and the vague, angular, geometric mounds of human cities that were gone forever.

Beyond the eastern rim of the continent, the plain dipped downward steeply. The white of dried salt was on the hills, but there was a little green growth here, too. The dead sea-bottom of the vanished Atlantic was not as dead as the highlands.

Far out in a deep valley, Kar-Rah, the city of the rodents, came into view—a crystalline maze of low, bubble-like structures, glinting in the red sunshine. But this was only its surface aspect. Loy Chuk's people had built their homes mostly underground, since the beginning of their foggy evolution. Besides, in this latter day, the nights were very cold, the shelter of subterranean passages and rooms was welcome.

The mummy was taken to Loy Chuk's laboratory, a short distance below the surface. Here at once, the scientist began his work. The body of the ancient man was put in a large vat. Fluids submerged it, slowly soaking from that hardened flesh the alkali that had preserved it for so long. The fluid was changed often, until woody muscles and other tissues became pliable once more.

Then the more delicate processes began. Still submerged in

liquid, the corpse was submitted to a flow of restorative energy, passing between complicated electrodes. The cells of antique flesh and brain gradually took on a chemical composition nearer to that of the life that they had once known.

At last the final liquid was drained away, and the mummy lay there, a mummy no more, but a pale, silent figure in its tatters of clothing. Loy Chuk put an odd, metal-fabric helmet on its head, and a second, much smaller helmet on his own. Connected with this arrangement, was a black box of many uses. For hours he worked with his apparatus, studying, and guiding the recording instruments. The time passed swiftly.

At last, eager and ready for whatever might happen now. Loy Chuk pushed another switch. With a cold, rosy flare, energy blazed around that moveless form.

For Ned Vince, timeless eternity ended like a gradual fading mist. When he could see clearly again, he experienced that inevitable shock of vast change around him. Though it had been dehydrated, his brain had been kept perfectly intact through the ages, and now it was restored. So his memories were as vivid as yesterday.

Yet, through that crystalline vat in which he lay, he could see a broad, low room, in which he could barely have stood erect. He saw instruments and equipment whose weird shapes suggested alienness, and knowledge beyond the era he had known! The walls were lavender and phosphorescent. Fossil bone-fragments were mounted in shallow cases. Dinosaur bones, some of them seemed, from their size. But there was a complete skeleton of a dog, too, and the skeleton of a man, and a second man-skeleton that was not quite human. Its neck-vertebrae were very thick and solid, its shoulders were wide, and its skull was gigantic.

All this weirdness had a violent effect on Ned Vince—a sudden, nostalgic panic. Something was fearfully wrong!

The nervous terror of the unknown was on him. Feeble and dizzy after his weird resurrection, which he could not understand, remembering as he did that moment of sinking to certain death in the pool at Pit Bend, he caught the edge of the transparent vat, and pulled himself to a sitting posture. There was a muffled murmur around him, as of some vast, un-Earthly metropolis.

“Take it easy, Ned Vince ...”

The words themselves, and the way they were assembled, were old, familiar friends. But the tone was wrong. It was high, shrill, parrot-like, and mechanical. Ned’s gaze searched for the source of the voice—located the black box just outside of his crystal vat.

From that box the voice seemed to have originated. Before it crouched a small, brownish animal with a bulging head. The animal's tiny-fingered paws - hands they were, really - were touching rows of keys.

To Ned Vince, it was all utterly insane and incomprehensible. A rodent, looking like a prairiedog, a little; but plainly possessing a high order of intelligence. And a voice whose soothingly familiar words were more repugnant somehow, simply because they could never belong in a place as eerie as this.

Ned Vince did not know how Loy Chuk had probed his brain, with the aid of a pair of helmets, and the black box apparatus. He did not know that in the latter, his language, taken from his own revitalized mind, was recorded, and that Loy Chuk had only to press certain buttons to make the instrument express his thoughts in common, long-dead English. Loy, whose vocal organs were not human, would have had great difficulty speaking English words, anyway.

Ned's dark hair was wildly awry. His gaunt, young face held befuddled terror. He gasped in the thin atmosphere. "I've gone nuts," he pronounced with a curious calm. "Stark—starin'—nuts ..."

Loy's box, with its recorded English words and its sonic detectors, could translate for its master, too. As the man spoke, Loy read the illuminated symbols in his own language, flashed on a frosted crystal plate before him. Thus he knew what Ned Vince was saying.

Loy Chuk pressed more keys, and the box reproduced his answer: "No, Ned; not nuts. Not a bit of it! There are just a lot of things that you've got to get used to, that's all. You drowned about a million years ago. I discovered your body. I brought you back to life. We have science that can do that. I'm Loy Chuk ..."

It took only a moment for the box to tell the full story in clear, bold, friendly terms. Thus Loy sought, with calm, human logic, to make his charge feel at home. Probably, though, he was a fool, to suppose that he could succeed, thus.

Vince started to mutter, struggling desperately to reason it out. "A prairie dog," he said. "Speaking to me. One million years. Evolution. The scientists say that people grew up from fishes in the sea. Prairie dogs are smart. So maybe superprairie-dogs could come from them. A lot easier than men from fish ..."

It was all sound logic. Even Ned Vince knew that. Still, his mind, turned to ordinary, simple things, couldn't quite realize all the vast things that had happened to himself, and to the world.

Ned Vince made a last effort to control himself. His knuckles tightened on the edge of the vat. "I don't know what you've been talking about," he grated wildly. "But I want to get out of here! I want to go back where I came from! Do you understand— whoever, or whatever you are?"

Loy Chuk pressed more keys. "But you can't go back to the Twentieth Century," said the box. "Nor is there any better place for you to be now, than Kar-Rah. You are the only man left on Earth. Those men that exist in other star systems are not really your kind anymore, though their forefathers originated on this planet. They have gone far beyond you in evolution. To them you would be only a senseless curiosity. You are much better off with my people—our minds are much more like yours. We will take care of you, and make you comfortable ..."

But Ned Vince wasn't listening, now. "You are the only man left on Earth." That had been enough for him to hear. He didn't more than half believe it. His mind was too confused for conviction about anything. Everything he saw and felt and heard might be some kind of nightmare. But then it might all be real instead, and that was abysmal horror. Ned was no coward— death and danger of any ordinary Earthly kind, he could have faced bravely. But the loneliness here, and the utter strangeness, were hideous like being stranded alone on another world!

His heart was pounding heavily, and his eyes were wide. He looked across this eerie room. There was a ramp there at the other side, leading upward instead of a stairway. Fierce impulse to escape this nameless lair, to try to learn the facts for himself, possessed him. He bounded out of the vat, and with head down, dashed for the ramp.

He had to go most of the way on his hands and knees, for the upslanting passage was low. Excited animal chucklings around him, and the occasional touch of a furry body, hurried his feverish scrambling. But he emerged at last at the surface.

He stood there panting in that frigid, rarefied air. It was night. The Moon was a gigantic, pock-marked bulk. The constellations were unrecognizable. The rodent city was a glowing expanse of shallow, crystalline domes, set among odd, scrub trees and bushes. The crags loomed on all sides, all their jaggedness lost after a million years of erosion under an ocean that was gone. In that ghastly moonlight, the ground glistened with dry salt.

"Well, I guess it's all true, huh?" Ned Vince muttered in a flat tone.

Behind him he heard an excited, squeaky chattering. Rodents in pursuit. Looking back, he saw the pinpoint gleams of countless

little eyes. Yes, he might as well be an exile on another planet—so changed had the Earth become.

A wave of intolerable homesickness came over him as he sensed the distances of time that had passed—those inconceivable eons, separating himself from his friends, from Betty, from almost everything that was familiar. He started to run, away from those glittering rodent eyes. He sensed death in that cold sea-bottom, but what of it? What reason did he have left to live? He'd be only a museum piece here, a thing to be caged and studied ...

Prison or a madhouse would be far better. He tried to get hold of his courage. But what was there to inspire it? Nothing! He laughed harshly as he ran, welcoming that bitter, killing cold. Nostalgia had him in its clutch, and there was no answer in his hell-world, lost beyond the barrier of the years ...

Loy Chuk and his followers presently came upon Ned Vince's unconscious form, a mile from the city of Kar-Rah. In a flying machine they took him back, and applied stimulants. He came to, in the same laboratory room as before. But he was firmly strapped to a low platform this time, so that he could not escape again. There he lay, helpless, until presently an idea occurred to him. It gave him a few crumbs of hope.

"Hey somebody!" he called.

"You'd better get some rest, Ned Vince," came the answer from the black box. It was Loy Chuk speaking again.

"But listen!" Ned protested. "You know a lot more than we did in the Twentieth Century. And—well—there's that thing called time-travel, that I used to read about. Maybe you know how to make it work! Maybe you could send me back to my own time after all!"

Little Loy Chuk was in a black, discouraged mood, himself. He could understand the utter, sick dejection of this giant from the past, lost from his own kind. Probably insanity looming. In far less extreme circumstances than this, death from homesickness had come.

Loy Chuk was a scientist. In common with all real scientists, regardless of the species from which they spring, he loved the subjects of his researches. He wanted this ancient man to live and to be happy. Or this creature would be of scant value for study.

So Loy considered carefully what Ned Vince had suggested. Time-travel. Almost a legend. An assault upon an intangible wall that had baffled far keener wits than Loy's. But he was bent, now, on the well-being of this anachronism he had so miraculously resurrected—this human, this Kaallee ...

Loy jabbed buttons on the black box. "Yes, Ned Vince," said the

sonic apparatus. "Time-travel. Perhaps that is the only thing to do—to send you back to your own period of history. For I see that you will never be yourself, here. It will be hard to accomplish, but we'll try. Now I shall put you under an anesthetic ..."

Ned felt better immediately, for there was real hope now, where there had been none before. Maybe he'd be back in his home-town of Harwich again. Maybe he'd see the old machinshop, there. And the trees greening out in Spring. Maybe he'd be seeing Betty Moore in Hurley, soon ... Ned relaxed, as a tiny hypo-needle bit into his arm ...

As soon as Ned Vince passed into unconsciousness, Loy Chuk went to work once more, using that pair of brain-helmets again, exploring carefully the man's mind. After hours of research, he proceeded to prepare his plans. The government of Kar-Rah was a scientific oligarchy, of which Loy was a prime member. It would be easy to get the help he needed.

A horde of small, grey-furred beings and their machines, toiled for many days.

Ned Vince's mind swam gradually out of the blur that had enveloped it. He was wandering aimlessly about in a familiar room. The girders of the roof above were of red-painted steel. His tool-benches were there, greasy and littered with metal filings, just as they had always been. He had a tractor to repair, and a seed-drill. Outside of the machine-shop, the old, familiar yellow sun was shining. Across the street was the small brown house, where he lived.

With a sudden startlement, he saw Betty Moore in the doorway. She wore a blue dress, and a mischievous smile curved her lips. As though she had succeeded in creeping up on him, for a surprise.

"Why, Ned," she chuckled. "You look as though you've been dreaming, and just woke up!"

He grimaced ruefully as she approached. With a kind of fierce gratitude, he took her in his arms. Yes, she was just like always.

"I guess I *was* dreaming, Betty," he whispered, feeling that mighty sense of relief. "I must have fallen asleep at the bench, here, and had a nightmare. I thought I had an accident at Pit Bend—and that a lot of worse things happened. ... But it wasn't true ..."

Ned Vince's mind, over which there was still an elusive fog that he did not try to shake off, accepted apparent facts simply.

He did not know anything about the invisible radiations beating down upon him, soothing and dimming his brain, so that it would never question or doubt, or observe too closely the

incongruous circumstances that must often appear. The lack of traffic in the street without, for instance—and the lack of people besides himself and Betty.

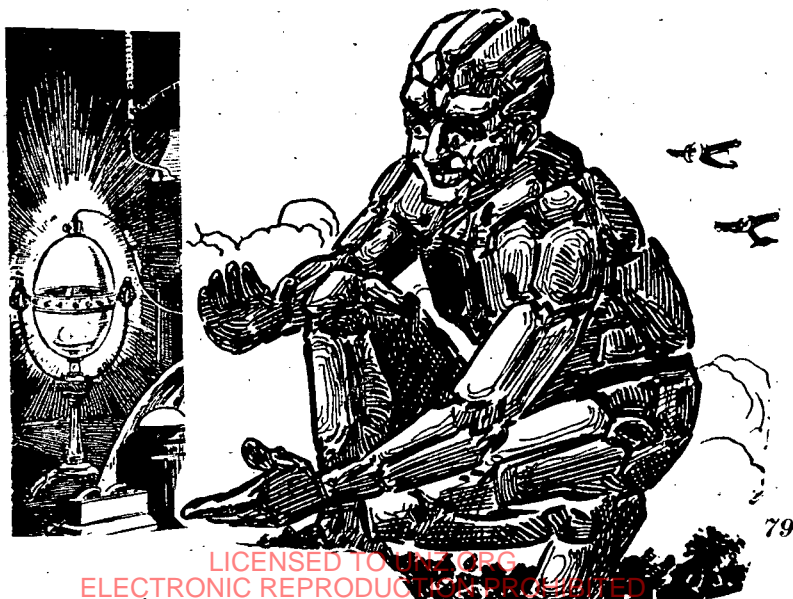
He didn't know that this machine-shop was built from his own memories of the original. He didn't know that this Betty was of the same origin - a miraculous fabrication of metal and energy-units and soft plastic. The trees outside were only lantern-slide illusions.

It was all built inside a great, opaque dome. But there were hidden television systems, too. Thus Loy Chuk's kind could study this ancient man—this Kaalleee. Thus, their motives were mostly selfish.

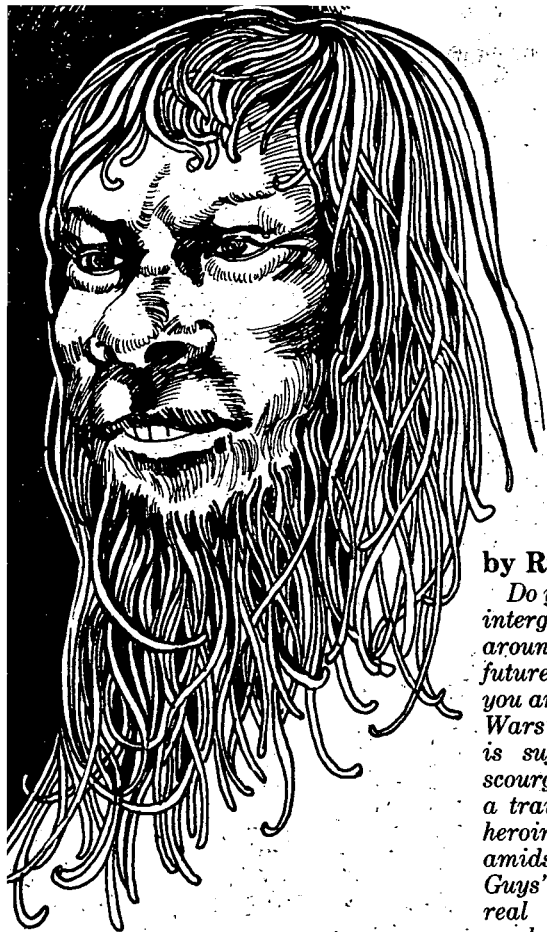
Loy, though, was not observing, now. He had wandered far out into cold, sad sea-bottom, to ponder. He squeaked and chatted to himself, contemplating the magnificent, inexorable march of the ages. He remembered the ancient ruins, left by the final supermen.

"The Kaalleee believes himself home," Loy was thinking. "He will survive and be happy. But there was no other way. Time is an Eternal Wall. Our archeological researches among the cities of the supermen show the truth. Even they, who once ruled Earth, never escaped from the present by so much as an instant ..." ©

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by Russell Branch

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INVADERS from the VOID

Full Length Feature Novelette

NIGHT HAD come, and darkness. But darkness alone could never hide this infection on the face of Earth, nor provide escape for the man who had brought it . . .

Ron Patterson stumbled hopelessly along the dim, deserted street. He suspected he was being followed, but what did that matter? What can life itself matter, to a man who has destroyed a planet?

The evidence was all about him, despite the dark. It was the darkness itself, here in the once-brightest-city of all. It was the feel of the slime-covered, rotting pavement beneath his feet. It was the stench, the swamp odor of death and decay which seemed to pervade even his oxygen mask. It was the inaudible whisper of a malignant growth as it spread and multiplied and destroyed.

Only a simple algae, the scientists had said at first. Or perhaps more of a fungus—but still no more to be feared than the good green moss of Earth. They had been wrong, of course. But by the time they got around to admitting it, it was already too late. And the people had supplied a name where the scientists had failed. They called it, simply and accurately enough, the Creeping Death . . .

The Creeping Death. Ron Patterson repeated the words to himself, and shuddered with the enormity of his guilt.

Not that he had known. No reason why he, any more than anyone else, should have suspected that the seeds of destruction had clung to those mineral specimens he had brought back from Callisto. No reason, either, why it shouldn't have been caught at Quarantine—except for the greedy impatience of a certain high official who had scorned the red tape of every department but his own.

Oh, there were lots of people to share the blame. Lots of mistakes, all duly established and officially recorded. But when you came right down to it: Ron Patterson was the man who had brought it in.

"You're the guy," his mind echoed now with every weary step. "You're it, brother!"

So why had they let him have one of the precious oxygen masks? Why should he, of all people, be one of the chosen few? They had used the Work-Scale factors in the ruthless, but necessary, process of elimination. Still, many men of more importance had been denied.

And what did they want with him now? He had told the Court of Investigation everything he knew, and it was all a matter of record. So now what? Further recrimination? They could have simply denied him an oxygen helmet. He wished, now, that they had.

Or did he? Another instinct, stronger than despair, protected his helmet now as he slipped and caught himself carefully. And perhaps it didn't matter that he was being trailed—but still he tried to muffle the echo of his lonely steps, and still he scurried from the protection of one shadow to the next. Like an animal in a jungle.

For Capitola, once the seat of World Government and center of all civilization, *was* a jungle. A jungle of rotting steel and concrete, where a man in an oxygen mask was marked for savage death.

HERE AND THERE a campfire flickered in feeble defiance of a Law that no longer existed, here and there another shadow moved. There was enough to make Ron Patterson freeze in his steps—even as he asked himself why he bothered. He wondered again whether he was being pursued, and told himself that all he had heard behind him was the echo of his own fear. *They* wouldn't have waited, not the Doomed Ones. But still, ever since he had slipped out into the night from his own lair . . . ever since he had left behind the protection of that cave, remembered from boyhood, on the far outskirts of the city . . .

He whirled suddenly now. And caught a glimpse of a dim figure slipping into the deep shadow of an entranceway behind him. So they *were* after him! Stalking him, closing in for the kill.

Instinct took over completely. He began to run blindly. Behind him pounded the steps of his pursuer, no longer furtive. And a low cry, too. A challenge, a call for reinforcements.

Reason slowed his feet again. There was no place to go, no help for *him*. He didn't know where the Council met; even so, he couldn't bring the savage pack to their door. Better to die, than betray the last remnants of authority in a lawless world and the last slim hope of a hopeless one.

But still, he ran. Even chuckled to himself, with grim futility, as he swerved suddenly into the dark mouth of a mid-block alleyway. One side towered the empty shell of a condemned apartment house. He ran the length of the building, leaped high to catch the top of the tall fence which extended behind it.

His arms were weak, his oxygen pack a bulky hinderance, but slowly he pulled himself up. One last heave of undernourished muscles, and then he was straddling the barricade. He looked back up the alley with a triumphant grin as he dropped on over.

But triumph faded as he hit the ground on the other side. Even as he dropped, he realized there would be only one explanation why this wooden barricade should still stand in a section where

steel and concrete crumbled to the touch. And now, still facing the fence, he caught the flicker of light reflected against the treated surface of the boards. He turned slowly.

FOR THE moment they were too startled to move. A dozen or more ghosts of humanity, huddled around a fire which itself could only smoulder in this fetid atmosphere. Once they had been men and women. Brokers and clerks and technicians and housewives—perhaps they had even lived in the once-luxurious apartment at their backs.

But now they were the beasts of this jungle, clinging desperately to life and their bit of primitive warmth. The embers reflected their gaunt, yellowed faces as they stared at him blankly. And Ron Patterson could only stare back at them with mingled pity and fear.

Then the scene broke. A voice, a hoarse voice which had once belonged to a woman, snarled incredulously: "A helmet! He's got a helmet, that one!"

The man by her side stumbled to his feet with an obscene curse. Then the whole pack rose, with shrill cries and clutching fingers. The helmet would do none of them any good now—in fact they would only kill each other over it. But still it symbolized all they had lost and all whom they hated. It was the mark of "The Chosen"—that ironical term they were screaming at him like a curse.

And Ron sympathized with them, even as he fought for his own life with his back to the fence. Almost automatically he fought, punching and kicking and squirming to rid himself of the skeletal hands which tore at his head and chest.

He broke free for an instant, long enough to see how well he had trapped himself. The high barricade enclosed the small yard on all three sides, with the side of the building at the other end. He could never scale that again. Even if he found the strength, they would pull him down first and swarm over him by the sheer weight of number.

There was only one way out; through the shell of the building itself. One misstep might bring it down on his head, or send him hurtling through a rotted floor—but it was his only chance.

He fought them off again and broke away. A closed door in the wall confronted him, and one man reached him again and clung to his arm. But Ron shook him loose with a bone-crunching blow, and the door collapsed at his shove.

Then he was running through the pitch-black interior, slipping and stumbling with the mob in full cry behind him. He ran straight ahead trusting his hunch that this was an apartment house, and that the corridor would lead straight through the

building to a front entrance.

He crashed headlong into some obstruction. It gave beneath his weight, but pitched him to the floor in a stunned heap. He staggered up, shaking his dazed head, and instinctively feeling to make sure the helmet was still intact and in place. Behind him the pursuit drew closer. A flare flamed up suddenly in the dark behind him, and a cry of discovery.

Ahead still lay utter blackness, but with a square patch of lighter darkness which promised the exit he had hoped for. He reached it, and found the street.

BUT STILL they were on his heels. Closing in on him from behind, with shrill cries to bring others to the hunt. Two figures were already running diagonally across the street, heading him off, and down the block others poured from their dark holes to block him there. He was completely surrounded now—and even as he realized this, he was already fighting off the first attackers.

Left . . . right . . . dodge . . . kick . . . they were weaker than he and went down easily, but always more swarmed in like a circling pack of wolves. He fought valiantly for several minutes, and then suddenly they were too much for him, and he was going down . . . down . . .

The next few moments were dazed ones. Ron knew only that he was at the bottom of a screaming, struggling heap. Others were trying to pull away those who had downed him, a pack of wolves fighting each other now for the spoils.

The pressure gave way suddenly. The screams of revenge were suddenly shrieks of terror and pain and warning; they scrambled away from him. Until there were only three still holding him down—and they no longer clawed or struggled or even moved.

Unbelievably, Ron shoved their limp bodies aside and struggled back to his feet. His attackers were fleeing in every direction, scurrying for cover. One man still hesitated near him, turned as if to renew the attack. The next instant he crumpled where he stood, in a blinding flash of blue flame which spurted out from the gloom of the building Ron had just abandoned.

Ron waited no longer to question the miracle which had saved him. The blue arc told him all he wanted to know: that someone, somehow, was still in possession of a lethal weapon. That in itself was enough in a city where all weapons had long ago been confiscated and destroyed, in the first useless attempt to prevent civil riots. Ron thought not that he had been saved—but only had been luckier so far than those poor souls whose bodies were strewn about him in dim heaps. So he dashed for cover, too, even

as desperately as had his erstwhile attackers.

Two blocks away, satisfied that he had escaped, he slowed down to take stock. He was still alive. He still had his helmet. And somewhere the last guardians of civilization still awaited him. For that reason alone he would keep going as long as he could. There was hope implicit in the mere fact that they had summoned him.

WHO "THEY" were, and where they were, Ron still didn't know. Even more, he wondered how they had found him.

A man had brought the summons the previous night. A Doomed one, Ron had thought at first, who had suddenly appeared at the mouth of his cave like a messenger of Death. Ron had leaped to his feet, prepared to fight for his life, but the eyes of the man had stopped him. They met his without envy or hate; with calm dignity instead of insane longing for the helmet Ron wore.

His message had been direct and simple. "Patterson, you are needed by the Council. Tomorrow night you will go to the Plaza in the city, leaving here immediately after dusk. At the fountain there you will be met by a guide who will take you to the meeting place. You will know him by his helmet . . . and I don't have to warn you to watch your step."

A smile flickered briefly in his sunken eyes, a wasted hand raised in a gesture meaning "good luck," and then the aged messenger had vanished as suddenly as he had come.

He had been, then, not one of the Doomed Ones, nor one of the Chosen. Rather, in the primitive terms of this primitive world, one of the very few Trusted. And before, in the civilized world . . . well, Ron hated even to guess what great abilities and authority had probably once been vested in that still noble figure.

But there had been no questioning the summons. And now he was almost there. Ahead lay the empty stretch of the Plaza square, there the spot where once the Fountain of Light had played its luminous symphonies.

Ron hurried forward, remembering the carefree evenings of a vanished past when this same spot had been only a lovers' rendezvous, and wondering when his guide would show himself. Suddenly he halted, and wondered no longer.

A body lay at his feet, in the very rubble which had once been the high shaft of the Fountain. The grotesque, shapeless heap told the story even in that light, and as Ron took another step forward his feet kicked the broken shards of an oxygen helmet.

He straightened up with a hopeless sigh. Thinking not of his own danger, but only that he could never find the Council now.

The fact that they had risked one of their own members showed how badly they needed him.

But there wasn't the slightest chance of his finding them without a guide. Not when hordes of savage people had scoured the city looking for the leaders they thought had betrayed them. Not a chance. Not even an incentive now to keep himself alive ... nothing ...

Ron was so wrapped in his own discouragement that he didn't even hear the light, cautious footsteps approaching from behind. He neither cared, nor knew, that anyone was near until the quiet, cool voice impinged on his consciousness.

"Poor Ramsey," it murmured. "*He* was a valuable man. I wonder if you're worth it, Patterson?"

CHAPTER II

RON WHIRLED, hardly believing his own senses. A feminine voice, a lovely if bitter one, in the midst of this nightmare?

But she stood facing him, a slender outline in trim flying togs. Starlight gleamed dully on the weapon in her hand, and Ron recognized its shape as that of the government-model Lethoray. That—and something in her proud stance, some remembered quality of her voice, prodded his memory.

"Varie Merlo!"

"Ron Patterson," she echoed mockingly. "The intrepid explorer of space. I called to you back there, but you ran like a scared rabbit."

He grinned wryly. "I might have known. I might have known that if anyone had a Lethoray, it would be someone like you. Some privileged character, like the President's daughter."

She answered, more in contempt than resentment: "And weren't you lucky I did, my friend?"

"I'm not so sure," Ron answered slowly. "I'll fight for my life, sure, but—"

"You weren't doing very well."

"Maybe not. But cold-blooded slaughter, with an illegal weapon. . ."

She shook her head wonderingly. "You're a strange man, Patterson, with a strange sense of values. Those poor souls were dying anyway, dying slowly and painfully. And for some reason, the Council seems to think *you're* more important."

"And what about you? You seem to be wearing a mask too, as well as carrying what is probably the last gun in the city. What's *your* job, baby? Besides shadowing men you dislike, I mean."

She didn't answer. She merely turned away, slipping the gun back in its holster. "Come on."

Ron followed her, still grinning wryly to himself. Remembering those first secret interviews with the great Addison Merlo . . . remembering too the cold antagonism of his daughter, who had served as his secretary. In other words, she had gotten under his skin, even then, and was still there . . .

"The famed and fabulous Miss Merlo," he murmured at her back. "I still can't believe my luck."

She turned her head impatiently. "The less noise we make the more chance we have of getting there. And I suggest you keep your distance, so that we can't be jumped both at once."

A very practical suggestion, delivered in practical, impersonal tones. Ron fell back fifty feet, trailing along behind her in the shadows of the buildings. They had reached Zone One now—the section where the Creeping Death had first started. It was hard to believe that less than three months ago these crumbling ruins had once housed the central government of an entire planet. But now there was nothing left, not even much to attract an occasional scavenging party, and the degree of infection here was so bad as to discourage even that.

Ron wondered how the Council itself managed to exist in this dread region. Suddenly he found himself almost on top of Varie Merlo, who halted with a warning gesture. He slipped into a wall crevice beside her, holding his breath.

A hundred yards ahead, a tattered band of ghosts filed across the rubble-choked street. A band of the Doomed, apparently still searching for the leaders they thought had deserted them. Men with only hate and desperation left to sustain them; and their silent march across these desolate ruins seemed a symbol of man's final defeat.

Ron sighed to himself, grateful at least for the human warmth of the body so close to his. Then he was aware that Varie, for all her apparent hardness, was trembling too. Whether from fear, or fatigue, or an emotion like his—Ron didn't know. But instinctively he put his arms around her, and held her close, and so they remained until the danger had passed.

Then she pulled away abruptly, and her voice was ice hard. "Shall we go, Romeo?"

"Lead on," he answered, and was glad she couldn't see his face.

THE COUNCIL, as Ron suspected, had gone underground literally as well as figuratively.

They felt their way in blackness down the first flight of crumbling concrete stairs, and then Varie produced a tiny

pocket raylight. The light aroused Ron's resentment again, and also confirmed his guess. They were in one of those old underground warrens, those ancient bomb shelters from another dark age in the history of man.

Most of them had long since been sealed off. A few, such as this, had been kept in condition for possible practical use. But even here the Creeping Death had begun its inroads. Its bright orange mycellium already threaded the walls and the baffles which were set out from them in staggered sequence.

The lower galleries became progressively cleaner as they descended, however, and finally ahead lay the air-lock, with the massive durasteel doors which sealed the inner chamber. Varie opened the outer one by pushing a concealed button, then waited to close it behind. The interior of the lock was brightly lit, and Ron was already searching for the release on the second door when Varie laughed behind him.

"First, my friend, we decontaminate ourselves. You can't open it anyway."

Whereupon she calmly began to strip. Ron stared in amazement, first at her, then at the row of garments already hanging along the hooks, then back at her.

"But . . . look . . ." he stammered.

"Look if you must," she said scornfully, "but it has to be done. Off with the clothes, Lover Boy."

Ron turned his back and grimly followed her example. If ever there was a girl who needed spanking, he thought, and if ever there was an opportunity . . .

But he was too much of a gentleman to take advantage of it. In fact, he heaved a sigh of relief when a garment like a long hospital gown was tossed unceremoniously over his shoulder. He put it on and turned to find Varie similarly, if more fetchingly, attired.

But his embarrassment was still not at an end. Varie picked up an ordinary old-fashioned garden spray, and sprayed him with intimate thoroughness. Ron recognized the color and the acrid fumes. It was TRX3, the scarce compound which was the only thing known even to discourage the orange blight. That same precious chemical had stained the fence he had climbed earlier in the evening—undoubtedly part of the precious government hoard which had been looted.

Satisfied with her job on him, Varie handed over the spray and indicated that he was to return the favor. Ron obliged, trying to remain completely objective about the job in spite of the lush lines under the thin, clinging garment.

Finally she nodded, and moved away. She spoke a stream of

meaningless syllables into what looked like an ornamental device on the face of the inner door. Machinery whirred as she gave the verbal combination, and then the heavy door swung slowly open.

The guard on the other side lowered his Lethoray gun and nodded to Varie as they went past. A "guard" whom Ron recognized despite the nightshirt—the Supreme Commander of the World Security force! He followed closely behind as they went on down the short passageway, and at last came into the chamber where a world would be saved—or lost.

RON'S FIRST impressions were practical ones. Lights . . . oxygen. Varie was already hanging her own helmet carefully beside the others strung along the rear wall. Ron followed her lead again, surprised at how few there were. Not even enough, apparently, for all of the forty men or so who stared silently at the newcomers.

Except for the guard's, there were no arms in evidence. Varie's had vanished too—except for a suspicious bulge under her robe in a spot where nature had never intended Varie to bulge! Again Ron found himself wondering at the girl's role and motives.

A low murmur followed Ron down the aisle behind Varie. "That's Patterson," he could hear them whispering. "*That's* the man we can thank for all this."

For his part, Ron recognized a few guilty faces too. Important men who had failed their jobs and now were trying desperately to make up for it. And most of all—the man who now rapped his gavel as if parliamentary procedure could save the world.

Eric Kiger. The former Chief of Exploration and Resources, who had bullied a petty Quarantine official into releasing those mineral specimens from Callisto. Who, at the hearings, had constantly played down his mistake by pointing at Ron Patterson.

Ron hated him, naturally; but still was not surprised to find him heading the Council as Addison Merlo's successor. Kiger was rugged, hard-driving, tough-skinned. A born leader, for such times as this. Furthermore—and Ron knew this from his own experience—Kiger had an immense grasp of technical knowledge in many fields.

"Order, gentlemen! Order, please!" Kiger met Ron's stare with a glare of his own. "Mr. Patterson, you did not return with the guide we sent to meet you."

Ron rose, flushing at the suspicion in the man's voice. But Varie Merlo spoke up before he could make his own answer.

"If you please, Mr. President, I brought Patterson here on my

own responsibility. I happened to see him—he was wandering around like a lost soul—and took pity on him. I knew he was needed here.”

Chuckles, and an appreciative grin from Kiger. Ron glanced at Varie, wondering what motive had prompted that deliberately casual description of her night’s activities. Whatever the game was, he could play it too.

“I proceeded to the rendezvous as directed,” he said stiffly. “Unfortunately, your guide was dead.”

Someone murmured, “Poor Ramsey,” and Kiger banged the gavel again with unsentimental impatience. “So you see, Mr. Patterson, why we must take every precaution. However, you seem to be safely here, thanks to Miss Merlo, and for your benefit I shall repeat some facts already known to the rest of us... Please do sit down, Mr. Patterson!”

Ron sat, feeling like a schoolboy.

“We all know,” Kiger went on, “that no practical method of controlling the fungus has been found. In fact our laboratories themselves have all succumbed, thus preventing further experimentation.

“Our sources of power have failed, and all forms of communication. Even so, there is no good reason to hope that any other spot on this globe has escaped. Many airships touched here in the normal flow of commerce before we set up our own self-imposed quarantine. Even then, many private citizens escaped our patrols—undoubtedly to flee abroad and thus spread the infection...”

“That’s common knowledge even outside,” Ron interrupted. “What about the other settled planets? Mars, Venus?”

KIGER IGNORED the interruption. “Unquestionably, the orange blight has spread its tentacles far and wide over the face of our own planet. Since Capitola, with all its resources, was unable to halt the destruction, there is no hope that other cities have fared better. The fact that no earth ships have appeared, proves it.

“As for the other planets... we have all hoped, of course, that our silence in itself would be enough to attract attention. That at least our own outposts on Mars or Venus would investigate and come to our aid.”

Kiger paused dramatically. “That hope, gentlemen, is gone. Two nights ago a Martian patrol ship moved within eye range. We managed to communicate by blinker—with a portable raybeam which was among the emergency equipment stored here. Their answer was as plain as it was disheartening: any ship

which even attempts to leave Earth will be attacked and blown to bits."

Silence. Bitter silence—and then the Supreme Commander of a mighty force which no longer existed, screamed hysterically "Just find me one ship—and we'll see about that!"

"You can't blame 'em, can you?" demanded Ron involuntarily. "They know what happened here; they've seen the results now. We'd do the same thing in their shoes—and let's not kid ourselves about that!"

It was only the truth, of course, but the truth can be scant comfort. Hostility glared at Ron from every side, and from his dias, Kiger grinned down at him sardonically.

"Objectivity, my young friend, can be anything but a virtue when you're fighting for your life. Also—you were summoned by the Council for a specific purpose, and not to give us lessons in logic."

Ron flushed, and Kiger raised his voice again. "The truth of the matter, gentlemen, is that we *do* have a ship!"

Stunned silence for a moment, and then rising babble of excitement. Kiger held up his hand again.

"A ship, yes. But one with limitations. It is an experimental model, which happened to be undergoing tests that saved it. Mr. Stillman knew of it—and after much searching he and I finally located it. It is stored in an underground chamber like this—except it is one which was fitted out as a vacuum chamber. From the observation window, at least, it appears to be still untouched: We didn't open the chamber, of course."

Kiger grinned at his audience. "I'll admit I was tempted, even as any of you would have been. But there were several drawbacks, aside from my own sense of duty. This ship is incredibly small, which indicates its radical design. Secondly, I doubt that anyone here, with the possible exception of Mr. Patterson, is capable of flying it. It reminded me of nothing more than the ship which he flew to Callisto—and unfortunately, back again."

Ron nodded slowly. "The K-3. I heard of it—an even more advanced model of my ship."

"So," said Kiger, "now you shall have your chance to... shall we say, redeem yourself?"

Ron hesitated, his thoughts in a turmoil.

"You mean you're *afraid* to tackle it, Mr. Patterson?"

Ron flared up. "Of course not! My past record speaks for itself, in that regard. But—"

"There are no 'buts,' Mr. Patterson! Not for a man in *your* position!"

Ron tried to choke back his resentment. Varie, Kiger . . . everybody wanted a kick at the man who was already down. He could feel the hostility of the group closing in around him from every side.

"You have a purpose, a reason for making this trip?"

"I can show you one," said Kiger furiously. "Even if it has to be a gun at your head."

"In that case . . ." Ron grinned thinly, "if that's the best reason you can offer . . . the answer is no."

CHAPTER III

FOR A moment the silence was so thick that Ron could almost hear the sound of Kiger's jaw dropping. Then the room exploded into violence. Voices rose in cries of contempt, and chairs were pushed back. The ex-Supreme Commander started down the aisle, gun drawn and outraged patriotism oozing from every pore.

Ron sat where he was, cold and withdrawn and almost indifferent. Kiger tried to regain his dignity by pounding with his gavel—but it was another voice which stopped them all in their tracks.

"Stop it, you fools! Stop it, I say!"

Varie Merlo stood on the seat of her chair, her Lethoray poised and threatening. Ron stared up at her with as much astonishment as the rest. She glanced down at him and bit her lip, with obvious uncertainty.

The Commander saw it and moved toward her. "I'll have to confiscate that weapon, Miss Merlo."

"You'll have to take it away from me first," she said flatly, and raised her voice again. "Gentlemen, this is the Council! You're behaving like . . . like a bunch of hysterical women! I am not defending Mr. Patterson, but only his right to be heard." She glanced at Ron again, with that same strange look of hostile calculation. "How about it, Mr. Patterson? What reason can you possibly give for refusing this assignment?"

"I haven't refused any assignment yet," Ron answered evenly. "I only refuse to be threatened. If Mr. Kiger has a plan which makes sense, I would like to hear it."

The room quieted, and with an effort, Kiger swallowed his anger. "I am surprised that it is necessary to elaborate the obvious. We know nothing further can be accomplished here, we know now that we cannot expect outside help. Our only chance, good or bad, is to send an expedition out.

"As Patterson should know, he himself brought this curse back

to Earth when he returned from the first successful trip ever made to that barren satellite of Jupiter called Callisto. At the hearings, he himself testified that similar growths exist there—although, he said, not in the virulent form which we have the misfortune to know. That suggests to me, if not to Patterson, that some natural enemy of the orange fungus keeps it in check on Callisto.

"We have a ship, which Patterson himself admits is even more advanced than the one he used on his first trip. We can therefore attempt to reach Callisto again, ferret out and bring back whatever it is that attacks the fungus. Failing that, we can at least land on Mars or even Jupiter and attempt to enlist aid. I know that I would gladly take the chance—and so would any of you—if we had the benefit of Patterson's skill and experience."

RON SHOOK his head slowly. "It doesn't ever hurt to look before you leap. In the first place, you are assuming that the original spores were imported with my mineral specimens from Callisto. . . ."

"It was the assumption of the official investigation," Kiger growled.

"All right: I also pointed out that I had touched Jupiter in an emergency landing on my return trip. But since it is true that the fungus has never been reported from Jupiter, I'll waive the point.

"Even so, it may not be a 'natural enemy,' or parasite, which controls the growth in its home territory. It may be due simply to the difference in atmosphere, lack of oxygen alone. Our lab tests were never extensive enough to establish that point. . . ."

"We can talk till doomsday about what wasn't done!" Kiger cut in again.

"All right," Ron admitted. "I agree that Callisto itself is worth a try. But as for landing on Mars or Jupiter or any other inhabited planet . . . no. Jupiter is unfriendly, to say the least. Only luck saved me the last time, and it would be useless suicide to approach that planet for help. Mars is—or was—friendly. But that is reason enough to stop me from carrying the contamination to them too. Our own people there and on Venus are virtual exiles; they have sacrificed enough already without bringing them our new affliction."

Ron's answer, was weighed in silence. Then Kiger forced his face into another sardonic grin. "I yield to Mr. Patterson's nice little sense of ethics. However—and impressed as I am by his over-worked conscience—I do suggest that as many as possible accompany him to remind him of his assigned goal once he has escaped the fate which the rest of us must await."

Kiger's voice was at once a sneer and a challenge. In fact, he seemed almost deliberately bent on arousing conflict in an atmosphere already tense with desperation. For that reason alone, Ron ignored the slur.

"I agree," he said. "However, I doubt that the K-3 can carry more than two or three passengers. Like the K-2, it was intended for experimental work only. Also, how do we get the ship out of its underground test chamber? Even if we had the machinery and men to disassemble it and then reassemble it above-ground, it would be hopelessly contaminated before we even started."

"I am not a complete numbskull," answered Kiger, "and neither is Mr. Stillman, who helped me locate the ship. The test chamber was apparently remodeled for its specific purpose. The overhead part rolls back—or did. However, now, it has disintegrated to the point where actually the ship is protected only by the plastifilm shell which was sprayed inside the chamber to make it airtight. The ship should be well able to blast its own way out. . ."

Kiger paused, and glanced around at his audience. "Aside from Mr. Patterson's cold feet, there is only one question. And that, gentlemen, is the toughest of all! *Who goes with our reluctant hero?*"

Ron, already busy with his own problems, listened with only half an ear to the discussion which followed. At first, unselfishness and reason prevailed. It was ascertained by a careful check that none of the surviving members of the Council could qualify as a competent botanist or bacteriologist, or even as a chemist. Ramsey—poor Ramsey—had been the expert in that field.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS were offered, but none agreeable to all. They wouldn't admit it, even to themselves, but the august members of the Council were human too. They were also exhausted, hopeless, and desperate. The veneer began to crack under the strain. Accusations of self-interest were hurled back and forth. A fistfight broke out on the far side of the room.

And Eric Kiger helped not at all. "Let us be frank," he said grimly. "By reason of technical knowledge alone, I myself am probably the most logical candidate. But you all want to go. You would all risk anything to escape this hell for even a few days."

A harsh voice answered him. "You're damned right! And I'm not giving up my chance to any other skunk who tries to call himself a scientist!"

That was all Kiger needed, apparently. He was off his platform in one leap, already swinging. Others dove in, and the last vestige

of order on Earth gave way. What was very likely the last meeting of the Council had turned into a free-for-all.

Ron backed away from the melee, seeking for Varie Merlo with some instinctive notion of offering protection. But that, he decided, was a laugh. Varie had already taken advantage of the situation to make a quick exit. Trust Varie.

And the fighting was not to end with fists. Men had already piled on the stout Supreme Commander, fighting for possession of his gun. Ron hesitated, knowing it was too late now to bring any of them back to their senses. Hunger and despair had finally broken the leaders even as it had the people; what had started as an argument was now a deadly grim struggle for survival.

A hand grabbed Ron's arm, and he turned to defend himself. It was Kiger, panting and torn. But he was only pointing toward the rear exit. "Come on!"

Ron still hesitated, and Kiger pulled him away. "*They* don't matter! If *you* get hurt, everything's lost!"

He grabbed up one of the oxygen masks, and thrust another at Ron. "Quick! While we still have a chance!"

But they had already been spotted. Several men yelled as they saw Kiger running toward the exit corridor. Ron dashed after him with the mob already on his heels. As he slipped through the air-lock door, Kiger slammed it behind him.

"That'll hold 'em for a minute! Let's go!"

BLINDLY, RON followed him along the black tunnel and up the endless stairs, adjusting his helmet as he ran. Then finally they came out into the starlit wasteland of the surface, and after several corners Kiger paused to catch his wind.

"Where now?" asked Ron breathlessly.

"The ship, of course. Stillman knows where it is, too, and will probably lead the others—but we'll get there first!"

"You're going to desert them?"

"Animals! Crazy animals. They'll only kill each other anyway, and perhaps wreck the ship in the bargain. It's up to you and me, Patterson. If we don't make it, no one ever will."

Kiger set off again at a run, and Ron followed. Much as he disliked the man, he had to admit the brutal logic of his explanation. If that ship was ever to get away—and if Earth's only salvation did depend on it—there was no time to worry about anything else. Not even Varie Merlo. No single life was as important as this.

Ron could already hear their pursuers behind, but Kiger was leading the way without hesitation. Through ruined buildings,

down one street and up another. Until finally they had reached the edge of the Central Airstrip, and had found the mouth of another black tunnel.

Kiger produced a raylight, and they went on down. There were only two short flights of stairs here, before the airlock. The outside doors had already been eaten away at their pivots and hung ajar. The inner door was still in place, but groaned as Kiger pushed it open. Then Ron caught the gleam of still another door in the beam of the light; and through the observation port in its center, the glistening skin of a spaceship's slender nose.

The glimpse itself was enough to thrill Ron. Kiger was already fumbling at the door, but he straightened up with a sharp exclamation. "Somebody's already been here!"

Together they burst into the test chamber, and now it was Ron who led the way. His first glimpse had satisfied him that externally, at least, the K-3 was not too different from her predecessor. His hand found a familiar release in the side hatch, his foot a familiar step, and then he was in. The cabin was empty.

Ron bent over the controls as Kiger pulled the hatch closed, his fingers seeking the familiar switches. One clicked, and the cabin burst into light. Kiger breathed triumphantly over his shoulder: "Told you she was still okay!"

"Sure," muttered Ron dryly, "the lights even work. Now if this baby's hot—and I don't burn out the whole works—we're okay."

More switches, then an unfamiliar toggle tentatively, and a familiar throb gladdened his ears. Ron trimmed them all back with a delicate, sure touch. The strange board was suddenly as easy to him now as that of a flitter-jet to any airpark attendant. He was home, he had a ship under him again, and he was happy.

"At least," he muttered, as he blew the tubes once again in quick succession, "I'll die happy. How about you, Kiger?"

Kiger's teeth gleamed in the greenish reflected light of the dials. "We'll decide that later. Right now I'm interested in getting away from here, before that damned fungus eats this ship right out from underneath us. And before our friends catch up with us. They *do* have a Lethoray, you know."

Ron had already taken the words out of Kiger's mouth. He hadn't been listening anyway; his ears had been testing the muted whine of the tubes. And now he cut them all in, with a yell of warning. "Here we go! Hold tight!"

The last, of course, was only the spaceman's standard gag for such occasions. Gravity held them in an iron grip as the tubes blasted wide open; the force of acceleration slammed them deep into the cushions of their padded seats and squeezed them as in a

wise. They didn't even feel the slight jolt as the ship burst through the fungus-rotted overhead. They didn't feel anything but that excruciating pressure until the long minutes had passed and the weight of 5 G's had eased.

Ron pulled out of it first. He trimmed his controls again, sighed with satisfaction, and then glanced at his still-gasping companion.

"Well... Callisto, here we come! I only hope we'll be able to do something for those poor wretches we're leaving behind."

Kiger was shaking his head. "Not Callisto, my friend."

"What d'you mean?"

"Jupiter," Kiger said—and there was a gun in his hand to back it up.

CHAPTER IV

IT WASN'T much of a weapon at first glance, in fact it looked like a toy in Kiger's hand. But its reputation was known throughout space. The famous little air-gun from Jupiter: it shot a tiny, invisible jet of "hard air" which killed at close range just as surely as the blast from any ordinary gun.

Kiger nodded his head, but the gun remained steady. "Get to work on those controls, Patterson. Set your course for Jupiter."

Ron hesitated a second longer, still measuring his chances with a careful eye. Finally he shrugged and leaned forward and manipulated the course-computer dial. He was grinning as he leaned back and looked around at Kiger again.

"Okay, tough guy. Around and around it goes. Let's see what you can do now with that pop-gun of yours."

Even as Ron spoke, the throbbing of the generators faded and the tubes died out with a soft whine.

"Blast you! I'll—"

"No you won't," said Ron. "Not unless you want to spend the rest of your life in this cabin. We're in the orbital grove already, and here we stay."

Kiger's face set, his hand tightened around the gun.

"It's okay by me," Ron said quietly. "Go right ahead, if you want to spend the rest of your days circling around Earth. When it gets too boring you can always blow yourself up. It's going to take a better hand than yours to pull this baby out of it without burning her up, I can promise you that."

Sweat glistened on Kiger's heavy face. "Patterson, you're either a rockheaded fool or a traitor, and I still don't know which."

"I told you I'd listen to reason, but guns don't impress me."

Particularly a gun like that. Maybe you should begin by explaining that much of it."

Kiger shrugged. "It was in the government collection. One of the few we saved when we destroyed the armory to keep them out of the hands of the mob."

"A Jupiter air-gun, and now you want to head for Jupiter. Just a coincidence. . . or is it?"

"That's all," Kiger answered wearily. "I don't have to explain the second part to you."

"You might try—unless you just want to wait until the oxygen gives out."

KIGER ANSWERED grimly, watching Ron's face. "You know as well as I do that the Creeping Death isn't any accident of nature. It's a synthetic culture—deliberately planted on Earth for a deliberate purpose."

Ron stared at the man incredulously. "You mean. . . it's a weapon? In other words. . . *biological warfare*?"

"An attempt to destroy Earth completely, or at least render it helpless against an eventual invasion. We can blame our old friends on Jupiter . . . and also the traitor who smuggled it in."

Kiger added the last with accusing emphasis, and it all came suddenly clear to Ron. He understood now the mysterious official secrecy which had surrounded the whole problem. And he understood the hostility which had greeted him from every side. They all suspected *him*—at least, all those who knew the truth about the "fungus."

He remembered now how during the investigation the Court had harped on the details of his emergency landing on Jupiter.

"So you really think," he asked slowly, "that that's where we'll find our answer?"

"What do *you* think?"

Despite the unfair implication, Ron could only nod. Jupiter was the scourge of the System, a heritage from the dark days following the Atomic wars. An Inquisition had followed the holocaust. All scientists, all technicians, engineers, and anyone who had had any conceivable part in the wars—all had been branded indiscriminately as war criminals and banished to the largest of our planets.

But Jupiter, for all its molten lava beds and streaming glaciers, had proved not so much a prison as an arsenal. The exiles had found it rich in uranium; they and their descendants had built an outlaw civilization which had outstripped Earth in scientific development while remaining barbaric in culture. For the only cultural heritage of the Jupes had been war; their only

ambition, revenge; and the Creeping Death could easily be their first step toward their goal of conquest...

So Ron nodded, but protested Kiger's implication that he had been the tool of the Jupes. "It was only luck I got away with my own life, when I landed there."

Kiger's smile was sarcastic.

"All right. *You* were the man who by-passed Quarantine with those contaminated minerals. Otherwise, it would have been caught and checked in time."

"And your ship was thoroughly checked when you first got back," Kiger countered. "Our mechanics could find no evidence of the troubles which you claimed forced you to make an emergency landing on Jupiter."

ONCE AGAIN Ron was at loss for an answer. It was true—there had been something strange about the whole affair. The mysterious trouble which had forced him down in the first place, his lucky escape from the Jupes, only to find that his ship once again functioned perfectly, and the final inspection which had failed to reveal anything wrong...

"Well," Kiger was saying with another shrug. "There's one good way to prove your innocence. We're not going to prove anything this way."

"There's still a couple of questions that bother me. First of all, Kiger, that fight which broke up the Council meeting didn't just happen."

"What d'you mean, it didn't happen?"

"I mean you deliberately encouraged it."

"Maybe I did," Kiger admitted blandly. "It would have ended up that way, anyway. If *anyone* was to escape, it had to come quick, and while the rest were momentarily distracted. I just took advantage of the inevitable, that's all. Otherwise, *no one* would have escaped. What's your other question?"

"Just this," Ron answered, leaning over and reaching casually for the gun in Kiger's lap. "If it came from the government collection, chances are it's not—"

Ron was wrong. Kiger had pulled back suddenly as he realized what Ron was up to, and his finger had jerked the trigger apparently involuntarily. There was a sharp little *zzt!* but it missed Ron and by that time his hand had closed over Kiger's wrist.

Ron had the advantage, being already on his feet, but Kiger was strong and fast. He twisted sideways in his seat, bringing one foot up in a kick that sent Ron crashing against the control board. Ron dove back in as Kiger got to his feet, raising the gun.



Again that sharp little spit of sound, but once again Ron's hand had closed around Kiger's wrist and the shot went astray. Ron hung on desperately as the big man struggled to pull his arm free, driving him backward across the narrow width of the small cabin.

Kiger crashed against the bulkhead, losing his balance for an instant that was all Ron needed. A sudden twist and heave—the tiny gun fell to the deck while Kiger yelped with agony.

Neither of them had noticed the door opening from the rear compartment, neither of them had heard the first sharp command. But they both heard it now—Kiger as he held his arm in pain, Ron as he bent to retrieve the fallen weapon.

"All right, boys. Leave that gun alone!"

Ron straightened around slowly, with a last longing glance at the weapon lying at his feet. But he had recognized the voice, and he could guess the authority that went with it. He looked at Varie Merlo, and at the Lethoray in her hand, with a rueful grin.

"Everybody in this league seems to have a gun but me."

Behind him Kiger cursed and made a sudden move, but Varie's gun moved even faster.

"You, too, Mr. Kiger. Get back there!"

SHE EDGED carefully forward, still keeping them covered as she reached down and groped for the little Jupe gun with her left hand. Her face was white and grim. She still wore the loose gown which she had put on in the Council chamber, but it was ripped along one side and deep red scratches showed against the cream of her exposed skin. Ron could only imagine what torture the take-off must have brought to her, hiding there in the bare cargo compartment without a padded seat to cushion the shock.

And Kiger, for all the pain of his own twisted arm was thinking the same thing. "Great space, Varie! It's a wonder you weren't killed!"

She straightened up, holding both guns now. "I blacked-out, fortunately. Until just a few minutes ago. Then I find you two scrapping like children, instead of worrying about your mission! What's the matter with you?"

Kiger quickly took the opportunity to repeat the argument which had led to the fight. He was still rubbing his elbow resentfully, but his smooth air of self-assurance was back. Obviously he took for granted that Varie was on his side; just as obviously he suspected Ron's motives more than ever.

Ron remained silent, knowing his protest would do no good. As Kiger talked he tried to figure out where Varie Merlo stood in this whole screwy setup. She had ducked out of the Council

meeting at the first sign of trouble—either knowing or guessing what it would lead to. Also, she had obviously known the location of the ship, which was supposed to have been a secret to all but Kiger and one other man.

Were Varie and Kiger working together then? Still, Kiger had been just as startled as he himself when their other passenger had made her sudden appearance. Also, Varie had taken a dangerous chance in concealing herself during the take-off—a risk which would have been unnecessary unless she were playing some inexplicable game of her own. Perhaps *she* was in league with the Jupes?

Studying her white, determined face now, Ron found that unthinkable. Her own father—the great Addison Merlo whom Ron had worshipped as a hero ever since boyhood—had been a voluntary victim of the Creeping Death. Addison Merlo had refused an oxygen mask, both to set an example and because, he had said, his own usefulness had ended. He had gone out, then, to perish among his own unfortunate people. Could the daughter of this noble soul be a traitor?

She turned to him now, as if aware of his baffled scrutiny. "What's your side of it, Patterson?"

Ron shrugged. "Kiger's suspicious of me. I'm suspicious of him. Everybody's suspicious of everybody. So here we sit, coasting along on a nice orbit that will get us nowhere."

Varie frowned, glanced at the control panel.

"I wouldn't, Miss Merlo! This baby's velocity is somewhere up there close to the speed of light—and like I told Kiger, it's going to take more than an amateur to bring her out of it."

SHE BIT her lip, shaking her head in perplexity. "I don't understand you. Mr. Kiger's told you what some of the rest of us have already suspected: that the fungus represents a deadly attack on us by Jupiter. And yet you still refuse to do what you can to help?"

"You agree with Kiger then?" Ron asked. "You think we should take on Jupiter all by ourselves, just to make sure?"

"What else is there?" Varie flared back at him. "Maybe we haven't got a chance in a million—but it's still one that anybody else would take. Anybody with any loyalty to Earth, that is!"

Behind her Kiger grinned smugly. Ron asked slowly, "And that's your only reason for wanting to tackle Jupiter?"

The girl answered furiously, "That's reason enough, for anybody with an ounce of courage in his veins!"

"Miss Merlo had another reason, too," Kiger interposed softly. "A personal reason, you might say. You see, her father was one of

the first to suspect the true origin of the orange blight. Or perhaps he knew from the beginning . . .”

“My father sacrificed himself for the world,” Varie interrupted indignantly.

“Maybe he did, my dear. But *not* the way the public was led to believe. You see, Patterson, when Addison Merlo resigned, there still remained one space cruiser, hidden and sealed, whose existence was known only to a few top officials. And when the ex-president disappeared—so did that ship and some picked men who had been saved for an emergency crew.”

Kiger paused and then finished with a shrug. “You can draw your own conclusions, but at any rate I agree with our charming stowaway. Jupiter’s the place to find our answers.”

Ron glanced at Varie Merlo, his thoughts awhirl again. The look on her face was enough to confirm Kiger’s startling story. She was staring at the big man, looking surprised and worried and crafty all at once.

Then Addison Merlo *had* sold out to the enemy, or at least had deserted, instead of making the noble gesture of self-sacrifice which had been used to explain his disappearance? If so, why had he left his own daughter behind—and what was she up to now?

It was too much for Ron Patterson, but he could agree with both of his passengers in at least one thing. Jupiter held the answer, if there was an answer. And if any of them lived long enough to find it . . .

Varie still hadn’t answered Kiger’s accusations about her father. But she did have still another reason which both of the men had apparently forgotten: “I may not be enough of a navigator to handle this ship, but I do know one thing. On our present course we’re a sitting duck for any Martian patrol ship that happens to spot us—and you both know what that will mean!”

Ron gave in with a shrug. He moved quickly back to the pilot seat and began making the first delicate adjustments which would gradually cut in the tubes again. In any ship, the use of power to change over from free flight to another course was ticklish at best. At this speed, and in this small ship, it was toying with suicide. The slightest miscalculation would be enough to start a spin, and a spin at this speed would blow the ship apart as surely as any explosion.

RON WAS concentrating so intently on his nerve-wracking task that he didn’t see the shadow edging into view on the visor plate above. He didn’t hear Kiger’s unruffled voice saying quietly, “Well, Varie, it was a good thought, but too late.” Nor did

he hear Varie's gasp as she ran to the observation port and peered out into the ebony night . . .

All Ron knew was the sudden jolt, the reaction in his controls and the slight lurch as if they had brushed something. Instinctively he cut the tubes, incredulously his eyes leapt to the visor screen.

Then he knew. The jolt had come from powerful magnetic grapples, and they had been picked off in mid-flight as easily as any fly by a swallow!

Ron's immediate reaction was to reach for the tube controls again. But a deeper instinct stayed his hand. If would only mean even quicker death to attempt to break loose, and their attacker was obviously a ship large enough and powerful enough to withstand such a tactic.

The same caution prompted him now to knock down the Lethoray in Varie's hand as he shoved in beside her at the observation port. "Don't be a chump, girl! You'll only blow a hole in our own side!"

He looked out, shielding his eyes. The enormous hulk of the attacking ship loomed alongside and above, like some giant space liner convoying a tiny lifeboat.

"Martian patrol," muttered Eric Kiger, peering over his shoulder.

Ron nodded a bit uncertainly. True, from what he could see—identification lights, the grim color of the hull, the general lines—it looked like one of the Mars patrol cruisers. Yet, it was surprising that it had been able to overtake the K-3 so easily. It was also surprising that they had not merely shot the K-3 down as they had warned, instead of risking contamination in this manner.

Even as he wondered, Ron could feel the slight bumps as the little K-3 was jockeyed into position so that its die port lined up with the airseal hatch in the side of the larger ship. There were faint thuds as the sealplate was dogged down tight, and then the scratching sound as a vibroamplifier was adjusted against the outside face of their cabin door.

"Open up in there! Open up, or we'll blast you open!"

The voice convinced Ron. But Varie Merlo raised her Lethoray again, pointing it at the port.

"Hold it!" Ron yelled, jumping to grab the gun from her hand. "They're Martians! Didn't you get that accent?"

Varie struggled with him, screaming a warning, but it was too late. Already Eric Kiger, apparently convinced by the high thin voice which had hailed them, had pulled down on the master release of the port opening. The door swung out, and the next

second their captors swarmed in over them.

Ron, still struggling to grab Varie's weapon, had one glimpse of the creature who chopped down at him with the butt end of a giant-sized blaster. He wore a Martian uniform, sure. But no uniform would ever hide the greenish, brute features nor the matted hair pelt of a Jupe.

CHAPTER V

IT WAS an effort to get his eyes open, and torture to face the light which beat down on him from above. Ron found himself staring up at the smooth, glaring metal ceiling of a small cabin. That, and the foul atmosphere, was enough to tell Ron that he was aboard the Jupe ship.

He groaned and pushed himself up on his elbows. Varie Merlo sat against the bulkhead directly behind him; knees drawn up and eyes blank. "Nice going, Patterson."

"We're alive aren't we? If you'd used that gun we wouldn't be."

"And that would have been bad?" she demanded bitterly. "Worse than this?"

"While there's life there's hope." He grinned, but already his own eyes were tracing hopelessly the gleaming, unbroken metal lining of their cell. The compartment was completely bare, only a fine crack outlined the one door set flush in the wall.

He glanced up at that glaring ceiling again. The white metal itself shed the harsh light which illuminated the room; obviously some luminous substance had been fused with the alloy itself.

"Radioactive," Varie took the unpleasant thought from his head. "Thanks just the same, but I still would have preferred a nice quick shot from a blaster."

Ron nodded slowly. He had heard of the "built-in light" which the Jupes used for illumination, radiations which meant slow death to any Earthman forced to long exposure. The Jupes themselves, through necessity, had developed a racial tolerance of radioactives far beyond that of the other races.

"What happened to Kiger?"

Varie shrugged. "They came and got him a little while ago. You've been out for nearly half an hour."

Ron rubbed his throbbing skull and tried to think. He could feel the pulse of the drive through the deck plates; obviously they were underway. But to where. . . and how long would it take? And what were they being saved for?

Varie had risen and was pacing the confines of their narrow prison. Her flimsy garment had suffered further damage in the struggle, but she was as far beyond false modesty as she was from

feminine hysteria. Ron looked at her with reluctant admiration, just as she turned and fixed him with that same frown of deliberation.

"Patterson, I've been thinking. I may have been wrong about you, and—"

Much as Ron wanted to hear what she had to say, he cut her off with a sharp hiss of warning. His ears had caught the grate of a bolt being pulled back on the door. As it swung inward, he stretched out on the floor again, feigning unconsciousness.

He felt the rush of air as the door was opened, he heard the thud of something—or someone—dropping to the deck near him. He gathered himself for action, and then heard Varie's voice, casual but with a note of warning underneath:

"Come out of it, Patterson! I think our friends want a word with you."

He opened his eyes and then climbed hastily to his feet. A bearded Jupe stood over him, blaster already raised for a brutal jab. Another stood in the doorway, also armed and ready for trouble. Kiger lay at his feet on the deck, unconscious and apparently drugged.

As the Jupe prodded him out, Ron threw one last glance over his shoulder. He realized now that Varie had saved him from a foolish move, as well as a brutal beating, and his eyes tried to reassure her.

"Good luck," she murmured softly.

HIS SILENT guards led him through the bowels of the huge ship to the bridge, and Ron quickly realized how futile any show of resistance would be. The ship fairly bristled with crew members, all armed and all going about their duties with that sullen, mechanical apathy which seemed characteristic. Their language was English, but so archaic as to seem almost foreign.

The Captain was a superior version of the same pattern. He, too, was huge and squat, and his resplendent uniform failed to hide the thick coat of coarse black hair. But a gleam of intelligence, a nasty sort of humor, showed in his pale amber eyes. He obviously prided himself as a gentleman and a scholar, and he spoke the modern dialect.

He waved the guards aside and indicated a bench. "Sit down, my friend. No reason why you shouldn't be comfortable, at least for the moment."

Ron sat, but his eyes strayed irresistibly to the visor screen at the forward end of the bridge. It was in the form of a globe, and Ron saw that they were in space as soon as he had oriented himself to the four-dimensional projection. Behind this, the

leading ship, stretched a line of similar ships in perfect formation.

The Jupe Captain had followed his glance. "Mission accomplished, as you Earthmen say. We're on our way home." He smiled smugly.

"What do you want with me?"

The Captains's eyes narrowed at the contempt in his prisoner's voice. "Let's say I just want to gloat a bit. Also to thank you. I understand, from the information I extracted from your fellow prisoner, that you're the chap who planted the seeds for us, so to speak."

This, to Ron, was the final bitterness. Being thanked by the enemy himself! If it were to mean special consideration he didn't want it; but any information he could provoke might still prove useful.

"Perhaps my 'planting' days aren't over," he told the Jupe leader sardonically. "Your ship has already been contaminated by mere contact with us."

"Ah!" the Captain waved a contemptuous hand. "You still don't understand, you Earthmen with all your supposed superiority?"

He hesitated and then went on, apparently unable to resist the opportunity to boast. "The orange fungus, my stupid friend, was a little surprise created in our own laboratories. Perfectly harmless—until stimulated by a certain radio-pulse of a frequency which your monitors couldn't even detect. Then, as you have learned so well, the culture propagates itself beyond all control."

He smiled again. "Creating that synthetic culture was easy to us. Transplanting it without detection was another matter, since we know your security screen is sensitive to the approach of even a scout ship from Jupiter. And that's where you were so helpful, my friend, you and your expedition to Callisto! We deliberately jammed your controls, forced you to a landing on Jupiter, and then let you 'escape' with the seeds that did the damage.

"The rest was easy. Our ships patrolled just out of detection range, each of them equipped with the special transmitter which stimulates the fungus culture. By the time you woke up to the danger of that pretty little orange plant, it was too late. And now, with Earth helpless, the other planets will be easy."

RON NODDED slowly. "You've destroyed the center of all civilization—and what good will it do you?"

The Captain shrugged. "In time, of course, we will take over. In perhaps a year by your time—when the blight has completely spent itself."

"War has never accomplished anything," answered Ron. "We learned that on Earth two centuries ago."

"Two centuries ago," said the Captain bitterly, "a certain ancestor of my own enjoyed all the benefits of that civilization which you hold so high. He contributed to it. He was a scientist, a great scientist—and for that crime alone he and his family were banished to what was then known as the farthest-hell-spot of space!"

Ron shook his head again, confused by the conflict in his own mind. He would even sympathize with this bitter exile-race, and that was the trouble. As Kiger had pointed out, objectivity is of dubious value when you're fighting for life itself. Ron wondered to himself whether that, in the last analysis, wasn't why Earth itself had fallen. With two centuries of peace had also come the emotional complacency which had made them so vulnerable. But *had* it been peace?

So Ron pondered as the Captain glared at him triumphantly, and then aloud he thought his way through the problem. "Captain, Jupiter has always been a blot on the conscience of every thinking man on Earth. Our trouble was that we didn't face our own guilt squarely; we tried to solve a wrong by forgetting it. Now our own injustice has come home to roost."

The Captain grinned vindictively.

"But you and your people are wrong, too. We can't blame you for being bitter; but we can blame you for pursuing the same course of destruction which can lead only to further warfare and suffering. If Jupiter had ever been willing to lay aside her arms and submit to the interplanetary Council, instead of blindly following a leader like Ivar—"

"Ivar the Great," intoned the Captain, making the automatic gesture of obsequiousness which had become a ritual on Jupiter.

"Ivar the great fraud!" retorted Ron involuntarily. "A cheap, crooked dictator—a relic of the dark ages of two centuries ago! You will never—"

The Captain lunged at him, the greenish cast of his skin almost purple with wrath. A huge paw smashed across Ron's face before he could get to his feet, and he went over backward. He scrambled to his feet again, ready to fight it out now on even terms, but already two of the guards had seized his arms, and others had leveled their sidearms.

It was as if Ron had uttered a blasphemy and every man within hearing had been instantly galvanized into a reflex action. As he was held, helpless, the Captain smashed his open hand again across Ron's face.

Dazed and stunned, Ron heard the command, saw the gleam of

the hypodermic in the hand of one of the guards. And he heard the Jupe Captain's voice, still shaking with rage:

"This one we'll save for the Leader himself."

Then, although he struggled against it, the sharp bite of the needle . . . and quick oblivion.

THERE WAS no dazzling light beating down on him when he awoke this time. There was only chill darkness, and the acrid stench of ammonia clutching like fingers at his raw throat. Ron sat up, choking, and a sympathetic voice muttered from the darkness near him: "You'll get used to it, chum. Breathe shallowly, and don't try to fight it."

Ron looked around, his eyes blinking and adjusting to the gloom. There were other dim forms beyond the Earthman who had spoken to him; at least fifty of them, all sitting as he was like silent statues of despair. Far beyond a corridor gleamed with luminous overhead light, and against the light were the vertical lines of the thick bars which formed their prison.

For it *was* a prison, Ron realized quickly. A prison dungeon on Jupiter, to judge from the ammonia-tainted atmosphere, and even as he thought this, his nearest neighbor spoke again:

"Welcome to the slave pens of Jupiter, friend. What good fortune landed you here?"

Ron answered simply, matching the irony in the other's voice, that he had been picked up by one of the Jupe patrol ships and was not here by choice. The other man seemed anxious for conversation, unlike the rest of the glum lot, and Ron quickly learned all that he knew.

His name was Deglen, he had been a radionics technician, second class, and he had been captured, like most of the men in this particular pen, by a Jupe patrol ship which had landed in New Chicago.

"We didn't have anything to fight with," Deglen explained apologetically. "New Chicago had already been practically wiped up by some sort of a damned fungus, and—"

"I know," Ron interrupted dryly. "I came from Capitola, where it all started. The Jupes apparently have destroyed every city on earth—but what I don't understand is what they want with us here."

Deglen didn't know, and apparently none of the nearby prisoners either knew or cared beyond the fact that it couldn't be for anything pleasant. Ron, still weak but restless, got up and picked his way among the squatting men with Deglen following. He found that still another pen, with another group of Earth

prisoners, bordered on theirs—and like all prisons, this one had a grapevine.

Some of the first arrivals had already learned the answer, to their sorrow. They had already been put to work, making repairs and cleaning out generating plants which had grown too hot even for the Jupes themselves! The Jupe civilization, as Ron already knew, was based on the crude and dangerous atomics of uranium fission. It was practically automatic, of course—but still there came the inevitable failures and breakdowns which could be remedied only by human hands. By the human hands of slaves who could be ruthlessly sacrificed!

"But that only means a slow and horrible death!" Ron protested. "Why haven't you refused, resisted—at least, sabotaged at every opportunity? Death from a blaster would be better than that."

"You'll see," came the hopeless whisper from the next cell. "Your chance will come, and then you'll understand."

The man moved away from the bars on the other side, and behind him his new friend Deglen nudged him sharply, and then Ron turned to find that two Jupe guards were at the gate of his cell.

"Patterson!" came the guttural command. "Show yourself, you who are called Patterson."

Ron hesitated, but one of the guards had already raised his wide-mouth blaster. "Patterson! We give you five, or we fire."

Deglen sucked in an unsteady breath, whispered anxiously, "Answer, chum! If you don't, it's curtains for all of us. They've already cleaned out one block, just because somebody blew his top and cursed a guard."

"One . . . Two . . . Three . . ."

Ron straightened his shoulders and made his way quickly to the gate.

CHAPTER VI

JUPITER—the city itself—nestled deep in a pock mark on the face of a scarred planet. Here once the irresistible surge of a glacier had once met the boiling inferno of a volcano; and here in the crater left by that titanic explosion the Jupes had built their only city.

Ron had heard the rumors on Earth, the legends passed down by the armchair explorers, but the cruel fantastic beauty which spread before his eyes now was beyond any Earthman's imagination.

His escorts had led him up from the dungeon deeps along endless spiralling passageways, until now they were passing through the streets of the city itself. Streets which in themselves still spiralled upward, as Ron's eyes and lungs and lagging steps told him. The entire city was laid out vertically, level after level, up and around the walls of the inverted cone which held it.

And at the very top, arching from rim to rim of the towering crater walls, was a translucent roof! Or rather, Ron decided as he craned his neck upward and studied its shimmering substance, a visible forcefield. Some sort of an almost tangible transmitted barrier, obviously designed for protection against the sudden ammonia storms and the frigid temperatures of the Jupiter night.

Ron remembered only too vividly his one previous night on Jupiter. Only the heat from his idling blast tubes had been sufficient to save him. And now he could see too the advantages of this site for the Jupiter stronghold. Undoubtedly a lava bed still bubbled far underground, and these steep cliffs held in its heat. Also there was only that one opening, the very top of the crater itself, to cover for complete protection.

Ron's weary body was growing weaker, and the guard behind prodded him impatiently. But still they climbed. Terrace after ascending terrace the city clung to the encircling cliffs. Ron wished that the engineering genius which had laid it out had also provided lifts, and then they came into a level where there were vertical elevator shafts at regular intervals. The air was cleaner here, away from the ammonia fumes which had settled to the bottom of the valley, and the buildings more elegant. He got some idea of the prevailing caste system from that and from the different appearance of the citizens they passed. He also guessed where his guides might be taking him.

Finally there remained but one level higher—and this was a white gleaming structure cantilevered far out into the void overhead. A guard challenged them as they entered a shaft hewn out of the cliff-rock itself. Then they were whisked upward, to pass by more guards. And then finally, out across a terrace which jutted out into space. Ron caught one breathtaking glimpse of the city spread out far below in a closed spiral. Then the guard shoved him roughly in through an opening of the transparent walls of the building itself, and Ron knew they had arrived at last.

THEY WERE in the aerie of the king eagle himself—the roost from which Ivar-the Great surveyed his kingdom as from the top of an inverted ant's nest!

Ron's head swam at first with the sheer barbaric magnificence of it all. An enormous hall, walled on three sides only by angled panes of crystal-clear glastic. Reflecting surfaces on the ceiling above reflected the city below, showing the whole dizzy panorama of which he had just caught a glimpse.

His own guards had stopped at the sacred threshold, but now the court guards had taken him in hand and were shoving him toward the throne raised high against the inner wall. He stumbled, and then a sudden blow from behind sent him sprawling on the thick carpeting. He tried to get up again, only to be knocked down again by another vicious blow.

"Bow, Earth-worm! Bow to the Leader!"

"Ivar, our Leader! Ivar the Great!" came the automatic chorus from the assembled throng.

Ron raised his head cautiously this time. From his throne above, the Dictator of Jupiter leered down at him. He was black-bearded and tremendous in frame, easily the size of two ordinary humans. His powerful body was clothed in tight-fitting, shiny black; with a thin braid of metallic gold spiralling around it in symbolic representation of the city he ruled.

The Jupes flanking his throne were likewise uniformed in black, but with only a tiny gold spiral on each chest. Obviously they were the nobles of his court; the syncophants which waited on every word of the great Ivar. And there were women present too—young women of smooth skin who could have only been captured slaves, judging from the heavy-boned and hairy Jupe females Ron had sighted on the streets.

Each of them was dressed only in the sheerest of filmy tunics, but their trance-like attitude gave them an unreal quality, like marble statues.

"Well," demanded Ivar with a harsh chuckle. "Have you filled your eyes, Earthman? And are you still so contemptuous of the outcasts who laid you low?"

Ron grinned. A slow, mocking grin that he couldn't resist. "Corny," he said. "You're at least six centuries behind the times, old man."

For a moment there was a stunned, incredulous silence. Then some black-garbed flunkey barked a command, and one of the guards sprang forward with a raised gun.

"Hold!" roared Ivar's voice above the uproar, and the scene froze again. Then he gestured with one hand, "Bring out the others!"

Ron stared as they were led in from a door to one side. Eric Kiger and Varie Merlo! Varie was dressed now in one of those

rainbow-thin gowns, every line of her beautiful body on public display, but she seemed completely indifferent.

Ivar's eyes gleamed as they fell on her, and his black-bearded visage parted in a smile. "Well, another jewel for our crown! Come here, my pretty!"

OBEDIENTLY Varie climbed the steps of the dias, sat down on the indicated seat next to the throne. She looked straight ahead, ignoring Ron's stricken eyes, not even flinching at the rough hand which stroked her slender arm carelessly.

"And what about this one?" Ivar's nod indicated Kiger, who stood trembling in his guard's grasp.

The guard shoved, and Kiger stumbled forward desperately trying to hold himself with dignity. "I am Eric Kiger, your Majesty, Leader of the Earth Council. I was on my way to negotiate a peace when your cruiser picked us up."

"Negotiate!" Ivar slapped his knee with a roar of scorn. "Negotiate, you say!"

"I am Eric Kiger," repeated the other desperately. "*Eric Kiger*. Surely that name means something to you, your Majesty!"

"If it does, I've forgotten it," the Jupe Leader said, roaring again at his own wit. "All right, away with him."

"But—"

"Ah, you feel you deserve special treatment—is that it?"

Kiger nodded eagerly, any trace of his former courage dissolved with fear. "Yes, your Majesty. You know full well what part I played—"

"Silence!" roared Ivar and chuckled again. "All right, Eric Kiger, you shall receive your reward from the prettiest hand I've seen in many a year." He turned to Varie Merlo by his side, handed her something which his huge, hairy palm hid from view. "Give it to your friend, my dear! Right between the eyes!"

Frozen with unbelief, Ron watched. Varie slowly raised the hand which now held a tiny jewelled air-gun, deliberately took aim and just as deliberately pulled the trigger. Kiger fell, his own death rattle choking off his cry of protest.

Ron was already hurling himself forward, but once again a blow from the guard behind sent him sprawling. Again a blaster was raised, ready for the command, but again Ivar raised his hand.

"This one has too much spunk. It would be a shame to waste it—and end it so easily. He should make an excellent slave—as long as he lasts."

A gesture of dismissal, and Ron felt rough hands seizing him

again. He caught sight of Varie once more, handing the Jupe leader back his gun with an obedient smile, and once again his anger moved him to struggle.

A great grinning guard chopped down with his pistol-butt. Ron remembered only vaguely being dragged back and tossed into the cell again—and then his exhaustion took him off into sleep.

HE AWOKE with a spinning head and the feeling that his mind must suffered from the beatings he had taken. He remembered it as a nightmare . . . the span-flung city of Jupiter, the overlooking castle of the Leader with its strange mixture of barbaric, medieval splendor and gleaming crystal walls. And Eric Kiger, who for some strange reason had seemed to expect mercy from the Jupe dictator . . . and then, Varie Merlo.

Most of all, Varie Merlo! It must have been a nightmare. Her docile acquiescence of the black-garbed Ivar's attentions, her cold-blooded murder of a fellow Earthman, her blank stranger's eyes which had looked right through him and beyond him . . .

Then a young Earthman whose name he knew somehow as Deglen was bending over him, and Ron came fully conscious and knew it had been no nightmare but bitter reality. Varie Merlo had sold herself and her friends out to the Jupes. . . there could be no other explanation.

"You all right, fellow?" Deglen was asking him.

"Fine," he answered, sitting up and burying his throbbing head in his hands. "Just fine, except for a skull that feels like it's coming off. I'd die happy if I could just get one of those black-haired sadists alone for a few minutes!"

"While there's life there's hope," Deglen said optimistically—and Ron grinned sourly to himself as he heard the echo of the words he himself had once spoken to an ice-blooded, double-crossing female named Varie Merlo.

The day—or was it the Jupiter night now?—wore on. A bucket of dry, tasteless concentrate rations was shoved through the gate by a Jupe guard. Ron gulped some down, as did his fellow-prisoners, only to keep his strength up. And washed the taste from his mouth with the hose which dripped continuously in one corner of the cell to supply their only source of water as well as their only means of sanitation.

There were never more than two Jupe guards in evidence, and once again Ron turned his thoughts to possible escape. The other prisoners seemed completely hopeless and dispirited, with the exception of Deglen, but still—given a leader and a plan. . .

Then Ron remembered the whispered words from the next cell: "You'll see . . . you'll understand . . ."—and he knew that the Jupes must have some devilish method of controlling their slave-labor groups. And within a very short time he had a chance to see that method in operation.

Three Jupe guards marched into the cell block, two of them armed with wide-range blasters and the third carrying a tray which seemed to be loaded with small glastic cylinders. They stopped at the adjoining pen, one armed guard and the man with the tray taking their position at the gate and the third continuing on around the outside to sweep the cell with his blaster from the rear side.

THERE WERE groans and mumblings from the prisoners inside, but at a threatening wave of the blaster they stumbled to their feet. The gate was chained open just wide enough so that one prisoner could exit at a time, preventing any concerted attempt to rush it, and they were gradually forced through it. As each prisoner passed through, his arm was jabbed with one of the glastic cylinders, while the second armed guard covered him with his blaster.

Staring from his side of the bars, Ron realized that the cylinders were ampules. And as each prisoner received his injection, he shuffled woodenly ahead at a word of command to join the growing line who waited in the corridor, motionless and without any further attention from the busy guards!

Deglen had been watching over Ron's shoulder, and now he whispered the phrase that was echoing in Ron's mind: "Hypnotic serum!"

"So that's how they handle us," Ron muttered, and he understood now why the others had been so discouraged. Once injected with the drug, a man became a living robot, an automaton without any will except to obey blindly a spoken command.

Ron wondered briefly what would happen if he were to shout a command to that waiting group of human robots, but the answer was only too obvious. The blaster of the two armed guards would level their ranks before they could move.

There remained only one prisoner now in the adjoining cell. Ron couldn't see his face in the dim light, but his heart sank with pity as he made out the stooped, gaunt figure of an elderly man. Slowly he shuffled to the gate, while the guards waited impatiently, and then with sudden courage hurled himself at the Jupe with the serum ampules.

The Jupe sidestepped easily, his cohort swung his blaster

around with a laugh, and the elderly one collapsed as the barrel crashed viciously against his head. Ron clenched his fists around the bars, hoping the other prisoners would only take advantage of this momentary distraction, and knowing at the same time his hope was futile. The others in the corridor still waited passively, motionless and wooden.

The Jupe with the blaster sighted on the figure at his feet, but the other one stopped him. "Put Grandpa in with these others. We can use him in the next work-party—if he's still alive by then."

The limp, pitiful figure was dropped inside the gate of Ron's cell; the gate clanged shut again; and then at a command the group outside marched off. Fifty men with only three guards, Ron thought . . . but *not* men, really. Helpless, will-less automata, they were—and so would remain until the drug had worn off. And by that time, of course, they would be back in their cell. Providing previous exposure to hot radiations hadn't already finished them off; and then his own group, the newest lot, would take their place.

The old man still lay in a heap on the stone floor, ignored by even his companions-in-distress. Ron cursed, remembering the old fellow's admirable if futile show of resistance, and hurried to his side. Behind him Deglen hesitated long enough to wet his scarf with cold water, and then bathed the wasted, leathery face as Ron supported his head.

The eyes opened, blinked up at Ron, and then he struggled.

"It's all right now, old boy. We're Earthmen, we're your friends."

"Pa—Patterson!" the old fellow gasped.

And Ron knew in the same instant that he was looking down into the lined, suffering face of the man who had once commanded a world. . . Addison Merlo!

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS SOME time before he could speak more than a few disjointed phrases. Already an old man at the beginning of the orange blight, Merlo had obviously suffered greatly at the hands of the Jupes. But Ron urged him to rest, and forced a thin gruel of concentrate and water between his lips, and at length he was able to sit up.

Merlo's story was short and bitter, much of it as Ron had already gathered. The ex-President had left Capitola with a picked crew in a secret and desperate attempt to trace the Creeping Death to its source. He had suspected, even then, the true nature of the blight; he had guessed that some traitor had

sold out to the enemy world . . .

"We suspected you above all," Merlo told Ron bluntly, but with a trace of humor in his weary, pain-ridden eyes. "I can see now that we must have been wrong. Anyway, we were immediately picked up by a Jupe cruiser and then I knew for sure that we had been betrayed. Supposedly no one, with the exception of my own daughter and Eric Kiger, knew of the flight in advance."

"Kiger was your traitor," Ron said grimly, and sketched briefly what had happened since the President's disappearance. "Having accomplished his job, he was probably supposed to have been rescued by a Jupe patrol. They double-crossed him, or just conveniently forgot him, and then he had to talk me into piloting the K-3 in order to make his escape. But now . . . well, he's earned his just reward. I saw him die—at Ivar's own command."

"And what of my daughter?" Merlo faltered. "You said she was captured with you? Does she still live?"

Ron hesitated. Having seen the fiendish hypnotic serum at work, he knew now the explanation for Varie Merlo's submission to the Jupe leader's will. But there was no purpose in bringing further distress to this poor old man.

"As far as I know, she's still alive," Ron answered evasively. "We have to find some way of breaking out of here."

Merlo sighed. "Hopeless, Patterson. Even if we did overcome the guards, we wouldn't get very far. And you saw what happened to my useless attempt."

Ron climbed to his feet slowly, shaking his head. "Not entirely useless, sir. It gave me an idea—and by the gods of space, we're going to make it work!"

BY THE TIME the guards returned, Ron's fellow prisoners had been transformed from a hopeless, defeated lot into an organized determined group. His plan depended upon split-second timing and the self-discipline of every last man, and at first there had been protests that it would get them nothing but quick death.

"You haven't anything better to look forward too!" Ron reminded them, and then when Addison Merlo himself volunteered for the first and most crucial move, the protests died in shame.

The guards finally put in their appearance, after hours of tense waiting, and took their positions as before with the automatic precision of an old routine.

Addison Merlo was first through the gate this time, and the Jupe with the ampules chuckled harshly as he reached for his arm. "Learned your lesson, eh, old one?"

But Merlo had already stumbled his arms flailing and sending the tray of hypodermics spilling. Quickly the other guard slammed the gate shut while the first Jupe viciously drove the pointed ampule into his arm and then sent him reeling against the corridor wall. Cursing, both Jupes at the gate then bent to retrieve the tiny cylinders. The flurry had attracted the attention of the third guard, but seeing everything apparently under control he returned to his station of the back side of the pen.

Merlo himself was now under the drug, but his apparent awkwardness had accomplished its purpose. In the instant before the Jupe had jabbed him, his floundering hands and feet had sent perhaps half a dozen of the ampules rolling back into shadows of the cell, where they had been quickly retrieved and surreptitiously passed from hand to hand.

At least Ron had one concealed in his sweating palm now, and Deglen behind him. The gate was cracked open again, the armed guard beckoned with a wave of his blaster and a curse of warning. Ron stepped through and in one smooth motion swung his left arm out from his side. The ampule jabbed home in the bare leg of the kilted Jupe with the blaster. Simultaneously Deglen, following close on Ron's heels, had shoved his own ampule into the reaching arm of the second Jupe.

For a split second their fate held in the balance. Both Jupes had already reacted to the sudden attack, but the powerful drug took instantaneous effect. The blaster dropped again, their faces stiffened. Ron shoved his now empty ampule into one limp, unresisting hand with a sharp, low command. "Use this for every man! Continue as if nothing had happened."

And with a prayer he marched on through, to take his place woodenly by Addison Merlo. Deglen quickly followed, and behind him the rest of the prisoners one by one. The hand of the drugged Jupe rose and fell in a routine motion, his armed cohort stood by with blaster poised, the prisoners formed their usual docile line down the corridor—and to the third guard all apparently had proceeded as usual.

Ron waited with trembling tension, not daring to look around, knowing that one false move, one indication from any of them that he wasn't drugged, would spoil the show. Then all were out, and the third guard had stepped up from behind.

"That's the last of 'em, Ron heard him mutter to his colleagues. "What's the matter with you? Let's go!"

His protest died in a gurgle as a dozen of the supposedly drugged prisoners jumped him from behind. A hand cut off his wind, another hand drove the point of an ampule into his back, and then there were three guards at their command.

Ron stepped out of line then, and quickly gave his orders. "Proceed as usual! Answer all challenges as usual. You are escorting a work-party in the usual manner. You are taking us to the airdrome. We have been ordered to clean up the patrol ships which have just returned from duty!"

The guards moved stolidly ahead. Ron surveyed his men with a last warning glance, and then went back into line between Merlo and Deglen. Just as mechanically as their escorts they moved forward, inwardly tense but outwardly just another group of obedient, robot slaves.

THEY WOUND through the dimly-lit underground passageway, passing several guard-posts without a hitch. Obviously of the lowest caste and lowest intelligence, the dungeon guards accepted the situation as normal without a second glance. But as they came out into the glaring brightness at last, Ron knew the crucial moment had come.

Crisp air filled their lungs, around them stretched the city rising like the walls of some enormous stadium. And Ron could hear the mutters in the ranks behind him, feel the rising restlessness. His voice carried hard and clear over his shoulder: "Steady! I'll shoot the first one who gives us away, or tries to make a break for it!"

They subsided, their marching footsteps beat on in mechanical cadence. The few Jupes on the street passed them without a glance; obviously it was a familiar sight, and the hypnotic drug had never failed.

It hadn't failed now—with those who had been injected. Unquestioningly their doped escorts led them on, winding higher and higher on the terraced streets. Then into the mouth of a huge horizontal shaft leading straight back into the mountainside—and Ron's guess was confirmed. The Jupiter air base was an immense tunnel cut through the enclosing mountain, with the entrance shaft leading in from the city itself and its mouth, undoubtedly, opening on the far side. Thus the ships could take off and land without endangering the metropolis itself or disturbing the protective force-barrier overhead.

But the shaft itself must have some sort of a barrier to close it off, Ron thought, and almost with the thought it came into sight. A huge bulkhead of black metal had been fused across the tunnel. There was a wide door in the middle, but before that entrance was still another sentry post, with half a dozen lounging guards.

Their leading escort halted, and Ron thought that their luck had ended. They were trapped now, and facing six or seven

blasters which could cut them down in a twinkling. Almost unbelievably Ron heard their doped guard answering the challenge with a parrot-like repetition of his own words:

"We have been ordered to clean up the patrol ships which have just returned from duty."

The sentry peered at the speaker curiously. "What ails you, Eno? Have these walking dead ones addled your brains?"

"We have been ordered to clean up the patrol ships—"

"All right, all right!" The sentry pulled a lever and stepped aside, with a leer at the blank-faced Earthmen. "We got some hot ones, I warrant you that."

The barrier swung open, the group marched through, and then it clanged shut behind them again. Ron took in the situation at a single glance. No guards in here—the steady blast of a sub-zero wind and the choking fumes of ammonia were explanation enough. Ahead lay the flaring mouth of the gigantic cavern, opening in a half-mile apron to the steel-gray Jupiter sky. And lined up along it, the gleaming black hulls of the Jupiter fleet.

There was no holding the men now, for they knew that they had succeeded. They broke ranks with a shout, splitting into the two groups as previously decided. Each group had an experienced navigator at its head, and members from an Earth patrol crew which the Jupes had taken prisoner as a unit.

Ron paused long enough to seize one of the blasters from the drugged, bewildered guards—and to end their perplexity forever with three short blasts. Then he raced after Deglen, who was already boarding the nearest cruiser.

A glance at the bridge controls and a word from the busy pilot reassured Ron. The set-up was quite similar to that of the old-time Earth spaceships, which one time too had depended upon "hot" atomic drives. Also, the pilot assured him, a briefing in all types of foreign ships had been included in their military instruction.

He found Deglen already at his post before a transmitter in the small radio room off the bridge, and he waited anxiously while the latter puzzled out the strange hookup and the unfamiliar dials.

"Okay," Deglen said finally. "I think I've got it."

"You know your orders?" Ron asked him. "Hold it for thirty minutes once you're overheard—and then give it full power if there's the slightest sign of resistance below."

Deglen nodded, but frowned. "You mean you aren't coming with us?"

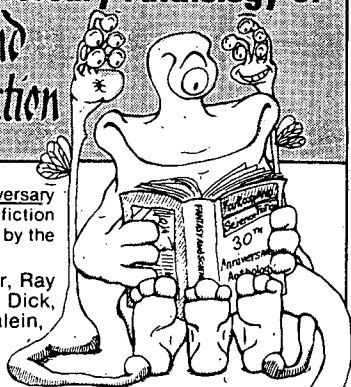
Ron held up his captured blaster. "Some unfinished business—including the rest of these cruisers. Somebody's got to take care

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of them, or you won't get very far."

Deglen nodded slowly, his homely face splitting in a hopeful grin. He had overheard Ron's conversations with Addison Merlo, and apparently had guessed the rest.

"Good luck, fella. When you find that 'unfinished business,' you can tell her her father's in the best of hands!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE green-kilted police guards of Jupiter were, as Ron already knew, a slow-moving and dull-witted lot; sad products of the excessive inbreeding among the lower class of the Jupes. And the guard called Aguan—he who watched the single entrance shaft to the Leader's castle crag—had been chosen for brawn and blind loyalty rather than intelligence.

But now, as the first reddish shadows of night-glow crept over the cliff-city below, Aguan's loyalty suffered. He was tired and bored and stiff with cold. He resented the shouts of drunken merriment which echoed from the jutting palace balcony above. So far there had not even been the usual diversion of royal feast nights—the dropping of screaming slave girls from that farflung parapet toward whimsical targets a thousand feet below.

Aguan had heard other sounds too, at his lonely post. A while ago the muffled thunder of several departing space cruisers, now and then the sharp sudden hiss of a blaster on the streets below. But none of this was Aguan's concern. His only worry was the arrival of his relief; and he turned now at a movement behind, thinking his man had come. But instead came the brief flare of a blaster . . . and then Aguan's worries had ended eternally.

But for the Earthman who darted past his shriveled remains, trouble had only begun. Already, Ron knew, the alarm must have spread from his swift encounters on the levels below. And now as he gained the elevator shaft, his ears caught sound of the revelry above. He could guess its meaning—a victory celebration by Ivar and his assembled leaders. And what could one do, armed even with a blaster, against that mob?

But still he pressed the lever that would take him straight up into the stronghold of Jupiter might . . .

The guard at the top of the shaft looked up listlessly. He was slumped out sprawling against the glittering wall of marcasite tile; obviously some of the festive liquor had found its way down his throat. As his bleary eyes focussed on Ron and at last registered, he tried to rise. But already Ron's hands were at his throat and after a moment of struggle he slumped again.

Cautiously Ron crept through the dusk across the terrace, hugging the inner wall as he worked his way toward the brightly lit, transparent shell of the palace. Hot fury gripped him as he peered in, but cold reason stayed his hand on the blaster trigger. One gun alone could never command that sprawling scene of orgy.

A banquet table had been laid the enormous length of this central hall. It had once been heaped with steaming platters and brimming bowls, but now one section had been overturned and the rest of it was in shambles. The Jupe war lords were scattered from one end to the other, some sprawled in drunken stupor on the floor, others pursuing their pleasure with screaming, struggling slave girls.

RON SICKENED as he realized that these captives had not been doped, so that their terror and feeble struggles might only add to inhuman sport. Even as he watched in horror, one torn and desperate maiden broke loose from her pursuer and ran through the open panel just beyond Ron. Frantically she dashed along the terrace, seeking a way out as her drunken tormentor followed.

Ron raised his blaster, unable any longer to count the cost, but already it was too late. The Jupe had cornered the girl at the far edge, and in her last desperate attempt to escape his clutching fingers she stumbled backward over the low balustrade. Her scream echoed thinly from below; the Jupe chuckled brutally and turned back in for another; and Ron with an effort slowly lowered the gun in his clenched fist.

With loathing he turned his eyes inside again, seeking a point of attack where he might at least stand a chance. Time was growing short; already he could hear the faint drone of a ship in the distance . . .

His eyes at last found Ivar, the giant Jupe leader in his gilt-spiralled uniform of symbolic black. Ivar, too, was roaring drunk and likewise having his sport. A slim, white-skinned figure, clad in the revealing slave robe, struggled in his hairy arms. She fought desperately and broke free—only to be seized by other rough hands and tossed back to the center of the group.

Time and time again she almost got away, but always to be shoved back again with a roar of savage laughter. Ron caught one glimpse of her face, the stricken, lovely face of Varie Merlo. Then his self-control broke, and he started forward. He couldn't hope to get all of them, but Ivar at least would feel the first blast and Varie would have the grim satisfaction of sharing his own quick death.

But as Ron gathered himself at the open entrance, he hesitated again. Apparently Ivar had tired of the sport, or else had been reminded of his duty by the uniformed officer who had just whispered in his ear. He raised his hand now for attention, and the uproar quickly subsided.

"Belay for a moment, my friends! Your leader must toss a bone to his people."

There was a cynical laughter and a few grumbles, but obediently even the drunkest of the lot staggered to their feet and filed out behind their commander, who was heading straight for the wide entrance where Ron still hesitated!

Ron ducked back hastily, taking shelter again against the shadowed rampart at the rear. Overhead suddenly the arched barrier glowed into light, flooding the entire bowl of the city with an illumination stronger than that of day. Ron shrank back still further, fearing that he would be spotted, but all eyes were on the huge figure of Ivar as he stepped to the edge of the balcony. He began to speak, and as his mighty voice rolled back from the surrounding cliffs Ron realized that some hidden amplifying device was bringing his words to every ear in the city below.

"People of Jupiter! Your Leader speaks!"

BACK CAME the echo of thousands of voices. "Ivar, our Leader! Ivar the Great!" From where he was, Ron could not see over the edge but he could picture the multitude gathering on the winding streets below, like ants pouring from a teeming hill.

"People of Jupiter, we have won the mighty victory I promised you but a short time ago. Earth has fallen, and her allied planets are isolated. The System is ours!"

Back came the dutiful echo, "Ivar our Leader," but it sounded hollow and unenthusiastic to Ron. "So what?" it seemed to ask. "What benefit to us?"

Apparently the war lords sensed this too, for they stirred uneasily and Ivar's harsh voice boomed out again with great promise of their future as the master race.

But Ron, crouching in his corner no longer listened. Now if ever was his chance, for not only were Ivar's top commanders clutstered about him, but even the guards and servants of the palace had gathered to hear their Leader's words.

He could, Ron knew now, destroy that whole evil crew with one quick, steady sweep of his weapon. Except for one thing—and the only reason his finger hesitated on the trigger. Varie Merlo was

in the center of that group, held securely by two Jupe officers, her head hanging limp with exhaustion. The other captives had been herded away, and even as Ron wondered for what purpose she had been brought out here, Ivar's gloating conclusion provided the horrible answer.

The Jupe leader turned and seized Varie, shoving her roughly toward the balcony edge before him. He held her there, poised, while his cohorts spread out closer to the edge and his voice carried down to the craning multitude below.

"Your Leader is grateful, oh people of Jupiter! He gives you our fairest captive—daughter of the once-mighty ruler of Earth itself! Take her—and see for yourselves how our enemies have fallen!"

Cold horror had seized Ron as he realized Ivar's intention of sending Varie hurtling to her death in the depths below. He knew he could never reach her in time, and now heedless fury tightened his trigger finger. The blaster swung, covering the long balcony before him with a sheet of flame that melted all who stood in its path. The first went down without even turning, the last had time only for a scream or a futile step before the arc reached them—until there was only black Ivar himself.

Ron's finger lightened at the last instant as his sights swung to their final target. For Ivar had whirled, pulling back Varie and holding her in front of him in instinctive self-protection.

FOR A second they faced each other, and Ivar read his advantage in Ron's hesitation. He edged toward the exit shaft, still holding Varie as a shield before him. She struggled feebly, but her strength was gone and the Jupe held her slender form as easily as a doll.

"Shoot, Ron!" she gasped, and her voice was a sob.

Ron hurled himself forward, dropping the blaster which could only reach Ivar at the cost of the girl's life. The Jupe hurled her aside too, as he met Ron's lunge. He grinned derisively as he braced himself to grapple, knowing full well that the Earthman would be no match for his massive strength.

But Ron knew it too; knew that only skill and speed could save him. His fists lashed inside the Jupe's wide-spread arms; a left and a right and then he weaved away again. Ivar shook his bearded head, hardly hurt, and clumsily tried to close again.

But still Ron circled around, landing blow after blow which the Jupe tried awkwardly to guard as he lumbered after his elusive foe.

It was a savage, silent fight to the finish. Neither of them saw Varie as she pulled herself up, stumbled over to Ron's discarded

weapon. Ron didn't even hear her frantic cry for him to get out of range; he knew only that hated, massive target and the numb satisfaction of his bleeding fists.

For the Jupe was beginning to tire of a game in which he couldn't even come to grips with his agile opponent. Debauchery had made Ivar soft; his wind was short and the Earthman's blows were beginning to tell. He stumbled angrily forward like a wounded bull, not realizing in his wrath that he was being led always closer to the yawning edge of the terrace itself.

"Now, Ron!" came Varie's scream. "Get back!"

But if Ron heard her at all, her meaning was lost. The lust for blood pounded in his aching body. He saw Ivar with his back to the rail, he pounded in again with the last desperate strength he could muster. The Jupe staggered back against the balustrade, trying to dodge. . . . stumbled blindly, and then went on over as Ron's right fist crashed into his jaw.

Panting and dazed, Ron stared over the edge. Dumbly he watched as Ivar's figure fell twisting through space, a sprawling, falling beetle in the bright glare of the radiant overhead bowl. In a trance of exhaustion his eyes followed it all the way down, until at last it was a tiny blot against one of the shining streets below—and the center of a converging mob of ant-like figures.

Then he shook himself out of it, at a sudden touch on his arm. He looked around and saw Varie, the blaster still trembling in her hand. He heard the nearing drone of the crusier circling overhead beyond the lighted barrier, and he knew that there was still much to be done.

"You stand guard," he told the girl, nodding toward the rear of the balcony. "We can hold them off indefinitely, as long as you cover that elevator shaft."

Then, with a wry grin for the fate that had put him in this exalted position, he turned once more toward the waiting, wondering city of Jupiter.

"People of Jupiter!"

HIS WORDS rolled back from the surrounding cliffs, like the might voice of a prophet.

"People of Jupiter, an Earthman speaks! Your leader, Ivar, has fallen. You saw him fall, and you can look upon his broken body with joy and without fear. He lies down there in the gutter where he belongs. His war lords lie dead about me, here on the palace balcony. You know the truth of what I say, by the mere fact that I am able to say it."

Behind him, Ron heard the sharp, reassuring spit of the

blaster in Varie's hand. He glanced over his shoulder, saw that she was holding her post, and then continued.

"People of Jupiter, your tyrant spoke truly when he said that Earth had fallen. The cities of Earth have been destroyed—by a secret weapon which you yourselves created. But now, unless you choose otherwise, that same weapon can bring you the same misery and destruction. Here somewhere in your city is the laboratory which spawned that weapon. Overhead you can hear the sound of one of your own cruisers, but one manned by Earthmen. One flick of a switch on that ship will set your own weapon in action against you; one sign of resistance and you all will perish.

"But we do not believe that you want to die. We do not believe that you want war and death and starvation. We need your help and your resources to help restore the mother planet which is home to all of us. I promise you, that with your peaceful cooperation it *can* become your home again.

"We, the men of Earth, have spoken. We can give you peace, and freedom, and justice for all. Or we can give you death, even as your leaders did us. You can believe what I say, by the mere fact that I trouble to say it when your position is helpless . . .

"Peace or death?" The choice is yours!"

Ron waited, and in the waiting silence it seemed he could hear the muted murmur of ten thousand voices whispering in sudden hope.

He spoke again: "If your choice is peace, follow this command. Choose your own delegates. One from each level, high and low alike. Let them come to this fallen throne of tyranny, where henceforth all shall be heard on equal terms."

He leaned over the edge, looking down and across into the sea of uplifted faces. There was still the great incredulous silence; the wondering unbelief of hopes which have at last been set free.

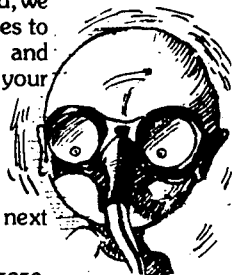
Then one distant voice was lifted: "Peace. . . Peace!" And others joined in—and more—until the swelling chant filled the hollow bowl of the city and the echoes reached the sky.

And over it all, one lone Earthman stood looking down, musing the destiny which had fallen to him. Thinking of the task of bringing justice where tyranny had flourished before; thinking of the eternal vigilance needed where treachery had ruled so long. And thinking, too, of the bright new Earth which could someday rise again from the ruins of the old . . .

Then he turned to Varie, saw shining in her face the light that would sustain him on the long, dark road ahead. ○

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back of the room turned their equipment on and made final checks.

The aide daubed at the beads of perspiration on his forehead and cleared his throat. He looked expectantly towards a partially draped door to his right. The door opened slightly, admitting a man dressed in a dark grey suit who nodded almost imperceptively to the aide.

Turning quickly to the podium the aide announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States," then stepped back out of the way.

Date: Mid-twenty-third century.

Place: A long abandoned amusement park pier on the Pacific coast of America.

The old man took the boy's hand as they stepped off the boardwalk onto the sand. They carefully threaded their way through the pilings and dead fish rotting on the beach. As they neared the water caution was thrown away and the boy dashed to the edge of the lapping waves.

"Grandfather! Is this really the cific Ocean?" shouted the boy with a sweeping gesture of his arms.

"Yes, my boy. That's the mighty Pacific Ocean. Did you ever see anything so big?"

The old man leaned on his cane and watched his grandson charge at the sea gulls making them take flight. He remembered when he too had the youth to run and expend energy wastefully. The boy spun about in a spray of sand and ran back to the old man's side.

"Tell me again, Grandfather?" pleaded the boy as he took the old man's hand.

"Again? Alright. You sit up here so you can see the ocean real good."

The draped door was thrown wide. Two more grey-suited men walked in briskly to station themselves on either side of the podium. The president strode in, followed by two more men and several high-ranking military officers, who remained behind him. The president stood silently at the micro-

phone for a moment, shuffling several sheets of paper. He cleared his throat and took a deep breath.

"Good evening. Sorry to call you out at . . ." he hesitated while searching for a clock on the wall, "at eight-forty, but what I have to say is of the utmost importance for everybody. I'd like to have this disseminated as quickly as possible." Shading his eyes against the lights, he peered inquiringly at the bank of television cameras and asked, "Are you television people ready to go on the air, yet?"

"Not quite, Mr. President. We're making the interruption announcement now," answered a man wearing a head-set. "In five seconds, sir." He raised his hand and ticked the seconds off with his fingers. Red lights glowed on each camera when he dropped his arm.

"Good evening, my fellow Americans," began the president. "I'm sorry to interrupt this evening's scheduled programming, but what I have to announce is of the utmost importance for everybody. What is about to happen is possibly the most important event in man's history," he paused to clear his throat and wipe his palms. "No one can tell at this time what the final outcome of any venture could be, however, I am willing to bet that we will come out of this on top. Our innate ability to survive and win, coupled with our technological know-how give us an advantage," pausing again he looked inquiringly over his left shoulder at his aide as he whispered questions rippled through the assembled reporters.

The aide swallowed hard and silently mouthed, "Go ahead."

"I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen, I seem to be rambling and I really should get to the point. I thought I could soften the impact of what I have to say, but I guess I'd better just blurt it out. Ladies and gentlemen, we have been visited by people from another planet."

A full heart-beat of complete silence followed his statement, then the air was full of questions.

"Calm down, now!" shouted the aide as he stepped up to the podium. "Questions will be fielded after the president's statement." The aide backed away from the podium and nodded at the president as the room quieted down again.

"Well, I was told I'd get a reaction from you with that statement. It is true, though. I myself have been in personal contact with them." The president paused again as a new round of murmurs died down. "They call themselves 'Matars'. The Matars are friendly traders and only want to buy one of Earth's most abundant resources at a most generous price. Of course they don't use money as we know it, but they are willing to trade for space ships, power plants, factories, raw materials, and the list goes on and on. We will, of course, make certain that we are treated fairly. The Joint Chiefs of Staff and I will be working out policing and defenses to make sure that this stays a friendly operation. Now, are there any questions?"

"The resource, Mr. President? Just what is it?" called out a woman in front.

All across the room the same question rumbled forth in a cacophony of voices. Again the aide jumped to the president's rescue and quieted the crowd, but with greater difficulty this time.

"Let me guarantee all of you that it is Earth's most abundant resource. It is estimated that we can sell . . .," checking his notes again the president paused, "one-half of one per cent of it and end up with enough to never have to tax the populace again. We have over three hundred million cubic miles of it. We literally have oceans of it," pausing again he flashed the audience a broad smile before continuing, "namely, seawater."

The boy sat on the rock patiently waiting for the old man to finish his story.

"And then the president arranged a meeting between the Matars and the World Council. I think they called

themselves the United Nations back then. Anyway, the Matars came and began to buy our seawater. We were soon one of the richest worlds in the Galactic Council."

"Tell me about before, Grandfather," demanded the boy.

"Before?" questioned the old man.

"You know, before the Matars came," said the boy.

The old man turned his cane in the sand absently as he began the tale of before the Matars.


"Well, before the ocean was huge, really huge. They say there used to be fish as big as your house."

"As big as my house? Really, Grandfather?" queried the boy, frowning, measuring with his mind.

"Really, son. See over there to the west? That land is called Japan. When I was a little boy the ocean was so big that you could hardly see it and the water was way up above the pier." The old man pointed his cane up the steep beach at the rotting pier and a tear rolled down his cheek. He wiped it away and slowly stood up, leaning heavily on the cane. "Come on, boy. We've got to catch that noon monorail if we want to get to Los Angeles before dark."

As the old man and boy picked their way up the beach a figure stretched on the sand stirred. A mator tanker pilot roused himself from a drunken stupor and staggered down the beach towards the water. His drinking appendage fell with a splash into the water and began to suck noisily as he began to drink his usual noon toddy of fifty or sixty gallons.

His ship was parked down the beach with its pumps going at top speed. The last time he took a reading the tanks were at three-quarters full. Another twenty-five million gallons and he would round up his crew for the trip to the bottling plant on Mars.

Further down the beach a group of Matar soldiers splashed in the water yelling the Matarese equivalent of 'Free Beer!'. 



FREE BEER

by Ron Lauten

Date: Late twentieth century.

Place: The White House press reception room.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let's have some sort of order. Please be seated," the nervous presidential aide shouted over the din of the hastily assembled reporters. They began settling down almost immediately and started bringing out note books and tape recorders. The television and radio crews in the

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